

## THE SAGA OF UNCEASING SUFFERING: THE “ZAINICHI” AND CULTURAL PRECARIETY IN MIN JIN LEE'S *PACHINKO*

*Arya R. S., Asst. Professor (Guest Faculty), Department of English, St. Xavier's College, Trivandrum, Kerala*

### **Abstract:**

*The twentieth century is an era of mass migrations. The migrants are not always welcomed guests and the case is worse if they get settled in the country of their colonizer. Such is the life of the Koreans in Japan, aka 'Zainichi' which forms the central plot of the Korean American writer Min Jin Lee's novel Pachinko. The Precarity Studies is an emerging area of research. Though it focussed on the economic and sociological aspects in its beginning, the alternate and advanced approaches as that of Judith Butler are gaining prominence now. This paper, titled, “The Saga of Unceasing Suffering: The “Zainichi” and Cultural Precarity in Min Jin Lee's Pachinko”, analyses the cultural forms of Precarity endured by the 'Zainichi' by a close reading of Lee's Pachinko.*

**Key Words:** *Precarity, denizen, othering, xenophobia, hegemony, zainichi.*

### **Introduction**

Territorial boundaries are, by and large, the state's concern. The layman has nothing to do with these tools of oppression. However, the human made circumscriptions do have underlying political connotations. The area of the territory gets widened or shortened by the agency of power and in the meanwhile the subjects of one state become the refugees in another.

The twentieth century was essentially an era of mass migration. People often migrate expecting better living conditions and better quality of life. These immigrants (refugees), unfortunately, don't attain the status of a citizen in the cultural psyche of a country where they get settled. They are, in Guy Standing's term, 'denizens'. Standing writes:

A denizen is someone who, for one reason or another, has a more limited range of rights than citizens do. The idea can be extended by thinking of the range of rights to which people are entitled civil (equality before the law and right to protection against crime and physical harm), cultural (equal access to enjoyment of culture and entitlement to participate in the cultural life of the community), social equal access to forms of social protection, including pensions and health care), economic (equal entitlement to undertake income-earning activity) and political (equal right to vote, stand for elections and participate in the political life of the community). A growing number of people around the world lack at least one of these rights, and as such belong to the 'denizenry' rather than the citizenry, wherever they are living. (Standing 14)

The migrants are almost always 'denizens' since they live legally or illegally, no matter what, in another country where they have only limited or no participation in its affairs.

In Sociology, the term 'precarity' is applied to a social class which lacks the fundamental resources of a human being. Insecure work and insecure livelihood are associated with this social class. Though the focal point in most of the authoritative approaches to precarity is economic insecurity, there are alternative approaches, as that of Judith Butler, which give emphasis on the uncertainty, unpredictability and vulnerability to injuries and suffering associated with precarity. The migrant populations are at high risk as

they are subject to multiple forms of vulnerability.

'Zainichi' is a term the Japanese use to refer to the Korean permanent residents in Japan. They are the descendents of those migrant Koreans who got settled in different parts of Japan. The Korean empire had been a protectorate of Japan for more than two decades. During this time, the Japanese rulers did their best to extirpate the Korean culture including their language, historical documents and even people's family names. As Robert Stuart Yoder observes:

Japan's build-up to and eventual entry into the Second World War created an extreme labour shortage, resulting in the Japanese government forcibly sending Koreans to work in Japan as labourers in construction, the mines and steel factories. After Japan's defeat in the war, about two million Koreans lived in Japan. Most Koreans (some 1,400,000 Koreans) chose to return to their homeland shortly after the end of the war but about 600,000 remained in Japan. In 1952, based on a directive from the Japanese Interior Ministry of Civil Affairs Bureau, Koreans, Taiwanese and other former foreign colonised subjects of Japanese nationality were stripped of their Japanese citizenship and later placed under immigration law as special permanent residents. Strict immigration policy, Japan's internal rebuilding. (Yoder 60-61)

The 'Zainichi' were permitted to adopt Japanese surnames later and the majority were happy to do so because they knew well that otherwise they would be occluded from the public sphere. They are still second class, marginalized Japanese citizens susceptible to violence and suffering.

Min Jin Lee is a Korean American writer whose family migrated to and got settled in New York in the late 1970s. Though she has penned only two novels, the second one, the political novel as she herself calls it, *Pachinko* has won for her global acclaim. Published in 2017, *Pachinko* was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction. It was after so many years of strenuous effort and research that Lee composed this tale of four generations in a Korean family under Japanese rule spanning almost eight decades from 1910 to 1989. 'Pachinko' is a gambling game in Japan. Quite a good number of Koreans in Japan are associated with the 'Pachinko' industry. The word is used as the title of the book since the Zainichi's lives are comparable to the game. They play endlessly without knowing the manipulative power of the gamer and never win.

### **Cultural Insecurity in *Pachinko***

Lee's *Pachinko* unfolds the story of Korean migrants in Japan. It is a universal phenomenon that the legally settled migrants are jeopardized on the basis of cultural norms. The migrants, in course of time, may attain the citizenship status. But the legal allocation is a far cry from the social relationships. Judith Butler opines in her lecture, "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics":

Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and becomes differentially exposed to injury, violence and death. Such Populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement and of exposure to violence without protection. Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection. (Butter lecture)

The enslavement and exploitation of the expats are made easy using the legacy of cultural superiority. The mishaps and dilemma of the 'Zainichi' are at the core of *Pachinko*. Though it harmoniously combines the tale of different generations, the Baeks family and their problems such as the struggle to cope with obnoxious natives and the inability in acclimatizing to the new culture are at the core of the central plot. Ethnicity too is a matter of concern. The Koreans and the Japanese are physically indistinguishable. Nevertheless their involvement in the daily social and cultural affairs is still at risk.

The novel begins in Yeongdo in Busan, in the Japanese occupied Korea. Hoonie, a strong, but differently abled man, marries Yangjin, an impecunious farmer's daughter. Their only child, Sunja, becomes pregnant with a Japanese trader Ko Hansu. Having married already, Hansu cannot marry Sunja. Isak Baeks, a sick pastor, wilfully marries her after knowing everything and takes her to Osaka, Japan. They join Isak's brother, Yoseb, and Yoseb's wife, Kyunghee. Here begins the saga of the brutal and barbarous discrimination against the 'Zainichi' which is the principal thread of the novel.

Even Sunja's life turns topsy-turvy after her meeting with Ko Hansu in a vulnerable and unpleasant situation. As a Korean girl, she suffers sexual harassment among a group of high school boys, the sons of some of the Japanese settlers in Korea. The boys call her "Yobo", the derogatory epithet used by the Japanese to describe Koreans. They ask Sunja: "Why can't you speak Japanese? All of Emperor's subjects are supposed to know Japanese." (*Pachinko*, Book I Ch.4). Though she neglects many attempts of Hansu to become acquainted with her, in a traumatic situation of being surrounded by a group of intimidating youngsters making plans to rape her, Sunja finds in Hansu a savior. Hansu was clever enough to use this situation to get close to the charming little girl.

Another instance of cultural alienation is shown through the life and deeds of Noa, Sunja's son. The dilemma and trouble which Noa stomachs are frantic manifestations of the predicament of an average 'Zainichi'. Noa is consistently under emotional turbulence and pressure because if his true identity as a Korean is revealed he will certainly lose his job as well as status. The terror of a knock-back gets reflected in almost every decision that Noa takes in his life. He repudiates his Korean identity and assumes the Japanese name, "Nobuo Boku" at school and "Nobuo Ban" in Nagano later.

Like all children, Noa kept secrets, but his were not ordinary ones. At school, he went by his Japanese name, Nobuo Boku, rather than Noa Baek; and though everyone in his class knew he was Korean from his Japanized surname, if he met anyone who didn't know this fact, Noa wasn't forthcoming about this detail. (Book II Ch.4)

But emotionally he cannot become Japanese either. This happens since the expats always want to get naturalized as natives of Japan since they are persistent victims of derogation in their colonizer's land. The constant fear of being caught red-handed makes their existence even more pathetic as they willingly accept the oppression and exploitation without complaining. Because by doing so they will be opening the door for the authorities to locate and punish them.

According to Guy Standing, a precariat experiences "four A's"- Anger: The frustration at the seemingly blocked avenues which generates a sense of relative deprivation, Anomie: The feeling of passivity born of despair which comes from a listlessness associated with sustained defeat, Anxiety: The chronic feeling of insecurity and Alienation: The knowledge that what one is doing is not for one's own purpose, it is done for others (19). The "Zainichi" come face to face with all the A's in their everyday life and the end result is rootlessness. It is this complete lack of the sense of belonging that makes Yoseb, Isak's brother, wish for his ashes to be taken to Korea.

In the novel, Noa represents the young cultural precariats. He struggles over identity and belonging as every other Korean in Japan. Noa undergoes all the psychic turmoil of a person trying to be someone else. He is even forced to hide himself from his own family. Noa marries Akiko, a Japanese woman, who admits that her parents are racists. In her search for Noa, Sunja is informed by Hansu about the fake identity that Noa presumes in Nagano. He says:

He is now Japanese. No one in Nagano knows he's Korean. His wife and children don't know. Everyone in his world thinks he is pure Japanese... Because he does not want anyone to know about his past. (Book III Ch.8)

Noa gets university education, but abandons his bright academic future and ends up working in the *Pachinko* parlour like his ordinary brother, Mozau who has never dreamed of getting educated. Noa's ambitions fall to pieces, his identity is a mirage, and finally Noa commits suicide thereby unburdening

himself of the dilemma of permanent alienation.

The perennial status of "Zainichi" as outlanders compels them to renew their registration card every three years, like Mozau's son Solomon in the novel. This is an administrative mechanism to grow their sense of shame in being the secondary citizens. Thus all fractions of the society are seen as using power in facilitating deep-dyed subjugation of the 'Zainichi'.

### **Xenophobia, Othering and Violence**

The most commonly agreed term that denotes anti-immigrant prejudice is xenophobia. Xenophobia is an attitudinal orientation of hostility against non-natives in a given population. Oksana Yakushko in her book, *Modern Day Xenophobia: Critical, Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on the Roots of Anti-Immigrant Prejudice*, defines Xenophobia as "a form of attitudinal, affective, and behavioral prejudice toward immigrants and those perceived as foreign. Xenophobia as a form of anti-immigrant prejudice remains far more prevalent as a contemporary social concept" (Yakushko 13-14). She also states that "paradoxically, imperialism and colonization were among the driving sources of creating firm boundaries between native-born individuals and the foreign-born natives (i.e., indigenous groups, other immigrant groups), even though the colonizers were themselves immigrants or foreigners". (Yakushko 22)

The non-Japanese citizens in Japan are treated as the 'Other' though they have been born and raised in Japan and most of them speak Japanese as their first language. Prejudice based on class, race, gender and ethnicity is at the centre of the concept of 'Othering'. The notorious progenies of Othering are of course inequality and marginalization. Powel and Menedian, in "The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging", define Othering as-

*a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities. Dimensions of othering include, but are not limited to, religion, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (class), disability, sexual orientation, and skin tone. Although the axes of difference that undergird these expressions of othering vary considerably and are deeply contextual, they contain a similar set of underlying dynamics. (Powel & Menedia 17)*

Xenophobic intuitions, clubbed with the notions of "Othering", most often give birth to violence. Yakushko discusses the hard-hearted and heinous treatment of the migrants in the contemporary world. She says: "xenophobia, like other forms of prejudice and social oppression, is profoundly violent" (Yakushko 52). The 'Zainichi' characters in the novel are always shown as the victims of crime. They continuously struggle against their inhuman ecosystem. The Baeks family is exposed to violence and discrimination in Osaka. Isaak is arrested, as part of the repression of Koreans, upon a silly charge of helping a Chinese boy, Hu, and the family has no contact with him for two years afterwards. He is released as a man smashed by trauma and he doesn't live long after that. In between Lee gives a brief description of the cells inside the police station.

The cells were full of Koreans and Chinese, and according their family members, nearly all of them had some sort of serious health problem that should preclude them from jail time. (Book II Ch.1)

Cold blooded savagery of the police force is a bane on colonial migrants. Lee portrays the Japanese law enforcement system as so rotten that it literally tyrannizes and victimizes Isaak. He falls prey to the xenophobic mindset of the organized, authoritative, hegemonic framework. When Isaak is released from prison after two years he resembles a sick beggar whom even Noa doesn't recognize. One afternoon when Noa returns from school he sees "a gaunt and filthy man collapsed on the floor" (Book II Ch.4) near the door. He was none other than Isaak himself. But the life in jail has made him a different man. When Sunja meets him,

Isaak was on the floor, sleeping... His hair and beard were nearly white; he looked years older than his brother, Yoseb. He was no longer the beautiful young man who had rescued her from disgrace... Dried crusts of blood covered his cracked, raw soles. The last toe on his left foot had turned black. (Book II Ch.4)

Isaak's predicament has a huge impact on the Baek's family which is blown away by antipathy and animosity of the colonial government against the 'Zainichi'.

Isaak is not alone in his sufferings. His sons Noa and Mozau, who form the next generation 'Zainichi', also lament the state of being teased severely by their classmates and pupil belonging to the same age group. Lee uses the police inspector, Haruki's investigation of the suicide of a twelve year old Korean boy named Tetsuo who jumped off the roof of his apartment building to illustrate the harassment and psychological trauma that the 'Zainichi' children undergo at a very tender age. These miserable experiences reshape them in such a way that they never ever come out to question the unjust social system. They would rather end their lives in silence. As part of the inquest Haruki checks the boy's middle school graduation album in which he discovers some messages written on the flyleaf in varied and inauthentic handwriting. They say- "Die, you ugly Korean", "Stop collecting welfare. Koreans are ruining this country", "Poor people smell like farts", "If you kill yourself, our high school next year will have one less filthy Korean", "Nobody likes you", "Koreans are trouble makers and pigs. Get the hell out. Why are you here anyway?", "You smell like garlic and garbage", and "If I could, I'd cut your head off myself, but I don't want to get my knife dirty". (Book III Ch.7)

The 'Pachinko' game is part and parcel of the 'Zainichi' culture and hence their colonizers always look down on the pachinko industry as something which is mean and felonious. Mozau chooses it as his career thereby assuming himself an unlawful position in the society. Though Noa tries to get elevated through university education, the surroundings again pushes him away to a remote village to join the same business where he desperately tries to present himself as an ethnic Japanese native. His life in disguise doesn't last long. He is found by his mother after years of search. Unable to tackle the complexities of an alienated life, he dies by suicide. As R.C. Tripathi rightly observes,

Violence is generally understood as an intentional act that is carried out with a purpose to inflict physical, social, economic, political or psychological harm. It may be directed against the self, individuals within the family - especially women, within communities, and against groups and nations. Collective violence ensues as a consequence of processes involved in the construction of social identity within different social contexts and how they enter into contestations, largely on grounds of loyalty to an ethnic or religious group, a culture or a nation. (Tripathi 4)

## Conclusion

Precarity is universal. Wherever there are migrants there are surveillance, control and oppression. The 'Zainichi' undergo double suffering as colonial subjects. Moreover, the second or third generation Koreans in Japan are exposed to extreme cases of rootlessness. They are neither Japanese nor Koreans. The Korean characters in *Pachinko* are forced by the circumstances to make Japan their home. But unfortunately the place they call home is their colonizer. Thus the Baeks family, central to the plot of the novel, carries the load of the mess and muddle which every migrant suffers in the name of ethnicity and culture. Some of them adapt to the Japanese culture, some others become rebels themselves. But from an analysis of their lives it is evident that both tread on a thorny path. Being perpetual aliens, they endlessly endure the pain, trauma and hegemonic violence as customary practice. This never ends.

## Works Cited:

1. Butler, Judith. "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics". Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 8 June 2009, Complutense University, Madrid. Lecture.

2. Lee, Min Jin. *Pachinko*. Grand Central, 2017. epub.
3. Powell, John A. and Stephen Menedian. “The Problem of Othering: towards Inclusiveness and Belonging”. *Othering and Belonging: Expanding the Circle of Human Concern*. Ed. Thomas, Andrew Grant, Issue 1, Haas, 2016, pp. 1439.
4. Standing, Guy. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Bloomsbury, 2011.
5. Tripathi, R.C. “Violence and the Other: Contestations in Multicultural Societies”. *Perspectives on Violence and Othering in India*. Ed. Tripathi, R.C. and Purnima Singh, Springer, 2016, pp. 3-28.
6. Yakushko, Oksana. *Modern Day Xenophobia: Critical, Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on the roots of Anti-Immigrant Prejudice*. Palgrave : Macmillan, 2018.
7. Yoder, Robert Stuart. *Deviance and Inequality in Japan: Japanese Youth and Foreign Migrants*. The Policy Press, 2011.