

Identity Fetishism and Cultural Essentialism in Eric Liu's *The Accidental Asian*

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Abstract

Eric Liu's The Accidental Asian discreetly exposed a part of Asian American's life and its associated issues in racial discrimination. Liu remarkably explored minorities' identity construction in American society in terms of identity fetishism and cultural essentialism. In a multiracial country like the USA, identity often makes non-native Americans toss and turn when they struggle to be recognized by the mainstream whites. Since America is basically a capitalistic country, one of the main philosophic issues underlying the construction of identity is fetishism. For people, especially the minorities in American society, practicing identity fetishism thus becomes indispensable when one tries to attain a desirable social status with an identity. While multiethnic and multicultural traits are emphasized, Americans, out of cultural anxiety, inevitably turn to cultural essentialism when it comes to the definition of American identity. The domination of identity fetishism exists in almost every aspect of American life, including furniture, food, clothes, etc., which an assimilationist has to take into consideration in his identity construction. If one does not follow the rule of identity fetishism subconsciously rooted in American psyche, he will suffer being alienated from the mainstream society. In that case a conflict springs up between the pursuit of white identity and the preservation of one's original cultural traditions. Sometimes, the conflict troubles the individual's decisions for integration and or assimilation. In this research, identity fetishism refers to the identification of the "right" social group or culture and its empowerment supposedly offers a guarantee of prosperity for all. Just as the fetishism of commodities creates an illusion of objectivity and commensurability of relations between things despite of their fundamentally social origin and character, identity fetishism assumes an identity of identities, conceived culture or race as the natural, essential properties of groups. In addition, in this study, cultural essentialism refers to a system of belief grounded in a conception of human beings as cultural subjects. Most people bear © In The Accidental Asian, Liu constantly places a stress on the Chineseness and his ancestral cultural background of his Chinese wholehearted grandma and self-disciplined father, while emphasizing his differences from them, especially the identity. This paper intends to discuss Liu's identity construction in terms of identity fetishism and cultural essentialism.

Both identity construction and cultural preservation are remarkable terms that could help draw a complete picture of Asian American's life and its associated debatable issues in Eric Liu's well-known *The Accidental Asian*. In Marxism ideology of capital economy, commodity fetishism refers to the way in which people just focus on the results of production or commodities but unaware of how many hours human labor created them. Likewise, the commodity fetishism associated with identity in Liu's identification is defined as people tend to depend on their ways of consuming products to identify themselves and enforce their social status, e.g. Starbucks, one of the most famous coffee brand names, is a place where mainly the elite prefer to shop and drink coffee. Not only does this phenomenon cover the capital countries, particularly the "melting pot" USA, which is supposed to be one of the highest immigration rates diversifying its culture and races, but nowadays it also does all over the world. Besides, a multiracial country results in a so-called cultural preservation, in which its culture is required to be conserved, purified and distinguished from the one imported by the immigrants or among races.

Starting with Chapter Two named “Notes of a Native Speaker,” Liu writes a series of singular first person sentences to insist Native Americans of discrimination prejudice on acknowledging him as a mainstream white citizen. This obviously proves that the other American half in Liu wants not only to meet his demand of being identified but also to voluntarily follow the majority rule. His identification based on choosing furniture, clothes, and food implicates that he can choose his ethnicity and race as well. Specifically, getting house furnished by Crate & Barrel, going on vacations accommodated with bed and breakfasts, affording house in suburbs, enjoying gourmet greens, wearing khaki Dockers and suede bucks shoes, considered to be the common ways high class or rich people spend their money, are expectedly accomplished by an Asian American Liu. He chooses to construct his identity and justify his conspicuous whiteness by carrying out such practices, for he is especially aware that becoming white is considered “achieving [and] learning ways of the upper middle class”(Liu 36). Plus, his purpose to get a sense of belonging in American life can be well recognized after such consumption, which maintains the consumers’ communication with society where they suit the social structure. In capital countries, commodity fetishism evidently impacts its citizen’s identity construction followed by a mindset that if one cannot do consumerism in a strained manner the mainstream Americans do to fulfill the upper class requirements and declare their own major identity as subconsciously as their peers, he is attributed to be poor, lower social status, and outsider of one race.

An obvious illustration in Liu’s text is in his freshman year that he feels ashamedly uncomfortable of his lifestyle entirely discriminated from the other friends or the white due to wearing wrong shoes, wrong socks, wrong checkered shirts with wrong slacks, all of which result from the influence of his Chinese culture. Then in the senior year he can claim his confidence to attire in tweed jacket, plaid bow tie, and button-down shirt shopped at Yale Co-op after gradual acculturation. Why must it be the confident feeling to shop and take on expensive or brand-named items? Is there any inferiority to wear cheap clothes? The main reason is simply that he could not find any sense of self with trivial consumption as what Todd states in his article, “Today it is virtually impossible to buy any product not embedded with certain symbols of identity.” Liu might be true in shifting his supposedly un-American style to a more Americanized ones. Indeed, being indulged in ways of consuming products for identity construction ingrains in his mind when he has no mirror except the people surrounding to reflect and detect the assimilation, accidentally getting him involved as “I do not want to be white. I only want to be integrated”(Liu 55). That he cannot attain the white identity in doing such low class consumerism and in a way of losing his Chineseness remarked by immutable Asian body make Liu sense that “color and class were all twisted together in a double helix of felt inadequacy”(Liu 47). While color refers to Liu’s race, class accompanies with commodity fetishism; both are closely related in a conflict that chasing white identity forgoes his ancestral culture. Likewise, an assimilationist, as what Liu admits, is a “traitor to his kind, his class, and his own family”(Liu 36) and “he cannot gain the world without losing his soul”(Liu 36). Since the USA is a powerful nation influential to most of the aspects in the world, having American identity can help assimilationist enhance the opportunity of reaching top of the world, but he has to exchange it with his soul connoting ancestral culture.

In “‘Race’ and Construction of Human Identity,” Audrey Smedley indicates, “Until the rise of market capitalism, wage labor, the Protestant Ethic, private property, and possessive individualism, kinship connections also operated as major indices that gave all peoples a sense of who they were”(691).

Similarly, Liu makes endeavors to afford luxuries for finding the “kinship connections” with American upper class. In other words, identification alludes to the struggle for social status; for whoever gains a high or prominent position, for instance, in politics that Liu works as a speechwriter for Bill Clinton, he could impress people with a new image of brilliant upper class American without attaching the underlying negative word “Asian.” People no longer impose bias on his manners, dressing, English speaking accent, skin tone and even his ethnic origin; otherwise, the newly-attained political tag on him now with the value of Clinton’s speechwriter is greater than the Chinese ancestral trivial one. Therefore, revelation goes more clearly that people are inclined to weigh what an individual does or gets in order to approve his identity. In other words, he is identified as a mainstream white as long as he makes big contributions and achieves certain significant fruits in the society where he is assimilated.

On the contrary to Eric’s psychologically American half, the “Chineseness” resides in his soul as an instinct to maintain culture constituted by the ethnocentrism of Chinese living in most of the world land. He boldly says, “You can take a Chinese out of China, but you can’t take the China out of a Chinese”(Liu 10). We can see this closely by the image of his father’s youth in which he is a person of family oriented, education weighing, Chinese food connoisseur, Chinese painting and poetry contemplator.

Liu is unsure of whether or not he can tell readers these traits “fit anyone’s stereotype of ‘Chinese character’”(Liu 3) but in American environment, they are so distinguishable from the whiteness that it turns out his efforts to conserve as a Chinese, who leaves his fatherland for another foreign country and lives a totally different life of new climate, culture, language, eating or communicative etiquette, etc. Indeed, the cultural preservation is prerequisite to a country to keep its distinction from the others and indispensable to an émigré to protect his ancestral blood drop. That is the rational reason for Liu’s defective knowledge of American lifestyle that he does not know how to write thank-you notes, particularly, after sleeping over at his white friend’s; he is never heard of saying the American formal words like “please” or “May I” around his house even though he can handle with all the Chinese “elaborate etiquettes.” Perhaps his father does not want to lose Chinese essence so he accepts his ABC son to be acting as an “awkward stranger” in most of the American ceremonies or etiquettes. For instance, on an occasion of eating dinner at “yangren” house, he feels no sense of belonging, just “looked back down and kept my mouth shut”(Liu 45), embarrassed with the table manners about “which pieces to use, in which order, and so forth”(Liu 45); therein, he is desperately tempted to return to his own familiar Chinese kitchen and enjoys eating in a way he has been taught by Chinese parents so far.

In Chapter Four “the Chinatown Idea,” when Liu pays an occasional visit to Po-Po, he always listens to her teachings about exercises, home remedies, praying way before Buddha, and other things involving Chinese tradition that he falls into boredom, wondering how slowly time elapses in these visits. Po-Po—a native Chinese, in fact, makes attempts to convey the Chinese culture to him as a patriot’s responsibility to keep culture typicality alive. It is more emphasized to depict the excitedly bustling manner of Po-Po rushing towards Liu, unremittingly chattering all things within her knowledge about China, and constantly feeding him feasts of Chinese cuisine in an indication of Po-Po’s unique goal in her whole life as a migrant that she has to help Liu permeate as much Chineseness as possible.

Apart from Po-Po, readers can realize that the Chinatown residents seem to confine themselves to their own territory and conservative in refining Chinese culture, e.g. they organize an enclosed economy, employ and exploit Chinese staffs only, and never learn English. In addition, inhabitants get accustomed to the Yellow inherent communality or clannishness as well as the “‘home rule,’ where natives govern themselves”(Liu 99). From Chinese perspective, Liu appears to defend such unusual lifestyles by stating it his own peoples’ rights and traditions steadfastly accumulated over century and a half. Despite being Americanized, he is still aware of protecting his ancestral cultural typicality and contented in re-colorizing his faded painting of Chineseness after travels to Chinatown.

Moreover, Liu states, “All I have is a bias: a deep suspicion that the ‘racial loyalty’ that hold Chinatown together is a pretext for something unseemly,” and “nasty, brutish shadow world” actually bringing readers to a deeper thought that he starts to dislike the way his countrymen congregate into a collective unit and isolate themselves from the broader space—their immigrant land—that “The New Chinatown, like the old, is apparently not in America”(Liu 99-108). It is said to build up a Chinese concentrated zone where inhabitants take their original lifestyle, business strategies, and unfavorable habits like contaminating environment, fresh-killing animals once accused by the white, and selling food with insanitary practices for granted. Therefore, they can be willing to ascribe such non-civilization unintentionally being witnessed by visitors to their meaningful peculiarity or cultural typicality in which culture determines their own identity as conceptualized in anthropology.

In conclusion, identity construction and cultural preservation both are employed from a very subtle pen full of Asian American bittersweets by profoundly observant eyes of Liu. *The Accidental Asian* is one of the trustworthy books for readers who wish to grasp the thorny past of ABC generations and the opportunity to engage in searching the how the commodity fetishism dominates over identification in the USA in contradiction with the ancestral mindset of an assimilitist, and what people need to do to sustain their culture.

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