Collective We and the Communal Consciousness of Diaspora Identity in Chang-rae Lee’s On Such a Full Sea

This paper examines how Chang-rae Lee’s On Such a Full Sea imagines a communal consciousness of diaspora identity through the use of a collective narrative voice that creates a narrative sense of split identity in readers’ minds. The novel’s use of heroine figure, Fan, as a locus of communal consciousness very much corresponds to the conventional framework of the Bildungsroman narrative, which builds a communal consciousness incorporated into a progressive history through a depiction of the individual hero’s or heroine’s reconciliation with social norms. The narrative consciousness grounded in this individual hero/heroine invites readers to experience the sense of community congruent with the linear development of history. Lee’s novel, however, complicates the narrative consciousness through a collective narrative voice “we,” by shifting the referent from “we” inside the narrative frame to “we” outside the narrative frame and by dislocating the main figure Fan from society. The sense of disjointedness manifested by the narrative sense of split identity and the heroine’s displacement in society conceptualizes diaspora identity. Diaspora identity configured in this way propounds a more liberating version of communal consciousness as it allows deviations from norms and exploration of new possibilities not bound by nation or ethnicity. The communal consciousness of diaspora identity depicted in Lee’s novel challenges the homogeneous sense of community merged with history and gestures toward heterogeneous deviations from history.
CHAPTER 6 “A special conviction of imagination” On Such a Full Sea (2014) Chang-rae Lee’s latest novel, On Such a Full Sea, was published in January 2014 and signaled the most radical change in Lee’s quest to “widen the stage” of his art.1 His move into dystopian fantasy in the novel at first seems unexpected given the intimate and carefully wrought literary realism of his early work. Christopher T. Fan noted that Lee’s fictional world is the result of “a process that can only be described as neoliberalization: either an unlivable cult of individualism, or an existential resignation and total dependency.”4 Lee commented that “the scariest dystopias are those of the soul.”5 The collective consciousness of the community of B-Mor narrates the story of the teen. On Such a Full Sea takes Chang-rae Lee’s elegance of prose, his masterly storytelling, and his long-standing interests in identity, culture, work, and love, and lifts them to a new plane. Stepping from the real to America, Lee tells a stunning, surprising, and riveting story that will change the way readers think about the world they live in. Chang-rae Lee’s unsettling new novel, “On Such a Full Sea,” arrives from that same frightening realm of total oversight and pinched individuality. But it’s a subtler, quieter affair, more The most striking dystopian novels sound an alarm, focus our attention and even change the language.