Original Paper

Cultural Identity Reconstruction in the "In-Between Space": An Analysis of Lee's Character in *East of Eden*

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Abstract

This paper revisits the identity reconstruction of Lee, a Chinese-American character in John Steinbeck's East of Eden, through the lens of Homi Bhabha's "In-Between Space" theory and within a postcolonial framework. The study focuses on how Lee navigates racial and cultural marginalization, utilizing cultural performance and discursive practices to transition from an "other" to the spiritual cornerstone of the family community. This process of identity reconstruction demonstrates that Lee reshapes power dynamics by transcending racial and cultural boundaries. However, this transformation does not dismantle binary oppositions; rather, it replaces existing cultural hierarchies with a new power center. By integrating close textual analysis with postcolonial theory, this paper highlights how identity reconstruction in literature reiterates the fluidity of power relations and cultural identity, offering fresh perspectives on identity politics and postcolonial discourse.

Keywords

East of Eden, identity reconstruction, in-between space, Chinese American, power transformation, postcolonialsim

1. Introduction

1.1 John Steinbeck and His Literary Creation

John Steinbeck (1902-1968), one of the most significant American writers of the 20th century, is renowned for his profound exploration of human nature, social realities, and ethical dilemmas. He won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a powerful depiction of migrant workers during the Great Depression. Other major works include *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *Cannery Row* (1945) and *East of Eden* (1952), which explore themes of human struggle, social justice, and moral complexity. His works

consistently reflect his concern with the struggles of marginalized individuals and communities, offering incisive critiques of society while probing the moral conflicts inherent in the human experience.

Among his literary achievements, *East of Eden* (1952) stands out as a magnum opus that embodies Steinbeck's philosophical vision and narrative ambition. Steinbeck himself described the novel as "the only book I have ever written" (Journal of a Novel), underscoring its centrality in his oeuvre and its thematic scope.

1.2 East of Eden

Set in California's Salinas Valley, *East of Eden* reimagines the biblical story of Cain and Abel as a multi-generational narrative focusing on the Trask and Hamilton families. The novel grapples with questions of good and evil, freedom of choice, and the possibilities of redemption, all symbolized by the Hebrew word timshel—"thou mayest." By foregrounding timshel as the philosophical cornerstone of the text, Steinbeck challenges determinism and asserts humanity's capacity for moral agency. Within this intricate narrative, the character of Lee—a Chinese servant who becomes an intellectual and moral guide— emerges as one of the novel's most compelling and complex figures.

1.3 "In-Between Space"

Homi Bhabha's theory of the "in-between space" shares a core ideological affinity with Shirley Simon's concept of the "contact zone," as both emphasize an organic space characterized by rupture, negotiation, and multiplicity. In postcolonial discourse, the "in-between space" is regarded as an "interstitial space" or "interstitial temporality," a space that resists reverting to "essentialist self-consciousness" and refuses to fall into an endless fragmented subjectivity caught in the "process" of identity construction (Bhabha, p. 5, p. 233, p. 310).

Bhabha points out that the "in-between space" reflects both the universality of language and the specific generation of meaning within particular contexts. In this space, cultural identity is not static within a single culture but is generated through cross-cultural interaction and negotiation, existing in a dynamic state of "neither this nor that, yet both this and that." This theory inherits the deconstructivist critique of binary oppositions and extends the critique of colonial discourse through the strategy of hybridity.

As an innovative theory that breaks away from the postcolonial critique of "binary opposition," Bhabha's "in-between space" reveals the state of mutual infiltration between colonizing and colonized cultures. In this "in-between space," cultural boundaries are constantly being reconstructed, disrupted by the bizarre forces of race, gender, violence, culture, and even climate differences, which disturb the authoritative order of expressions, ultimately presenting a complex form where hybridity and classification coexist. Bhabha's theory of the "in-between space" aims to dismantle the binary opposition between the self and the other and provides a theoretical foundation for demonstrating the heterogeneity of culture, making this space an essential field for carrying profound cultural significance.

2. Lee's Marginalized Identity as "The Other"

2.1 Marginalization in Text

In *East of Eden*, Lee embodies the archetype of a marginalized "other" within the Western familial and societal structure. As a Chinese servant, Lee's identity is not only shaped by racial and cultural stereotypes but also further diminished by his role as a household servant. Early in the novel, Lee is described as "a good and respectful servant" (Steinbeck, p. 159), a portrayal reinforcing Western literary stereotypes of Chinese men as passive and subservient. Lee's use of pidgin English when interacting with outsiders underscores his keen awareness of societal expectations. This deliberate performance shields his intellectual depth and ensures his survival within a society that marginalizes him (Steinbeck, p. 161). Lee's strategic use of pidgin English simultaneously reflects his self-preservation instincts and his subtle resistance to being fully defined by such stereotypes.

However, Steinbeck's portrayal of Lee transcends the surface-level depiction of an "other." Lee is not merely a servant but also a philosopher, an educator, and a moral compass for the Trask family. For instance, when Adam Trask becomes paralyzed by grief following family tragedy, it is Lee's philosophical insights that help Adam rediscover meaning in life (Steinbeck, p. 265). This transformation highlights Lee's active participation in the family's emotional and moral landscape, defying the limitations of his marginalized identity. This aligns with Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," where marginalized individuals adopt and adapt dominant cultural norms to subvert power structures while maintaining their own identity (Bhabha, pp. 122-123). Lee reflects the dual identity of the "other" in cultural oppression: simultaneously conforming to and resisting hegemonic norms. Significantly, Lee's behavior differs markedly in private family settings compared to public interactions. Within the Trask household, Lee demonstrates profound emotional investment and intellectual contributions. For example, he not only excels in practical matters like cooking but also provides spiritual guidance through his interpretation of biblical stories, such as the story of Cain and Abel (Steinbeck, p. 299). This complexity positions Lee as both a passive victim of marginalization and an active constructor of a culturally symbolic identity.

2.2 Generation of the "In-Between Space"

Homi Bhabha's concept of the "in-between space" provides a nuanced framework for analyzing Lee's transformative role within the Trask household in *East of Eden*. Through cultural adaptation and active participation, Lee constructs an interstitial space that both challenges established power dynamics and redefines his identity. One prominent illustration is Lee's pivotal discussion with Adam and Samuel Hamilton regarding the interpretation of the word "*timshel.*" Lee contends that the term signifies "thou mayest" rather than "thou shalt" or "thou must," emphasizing the individual's freedom to choose between good and evil (Steinbeck, p. 301). By reinterpreting biblical texts, Lee disrupts the exclusivity of Western religious and philosophical traditions, situating the voice of the "other" as central to cultural dialogue.

Importantly, Lee's "in-between space" is not merely a theoretical construct but is actively realized in the dynamics of everyday family life. For example, in his role as an educator, Lee integrates traditional

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Chinese values with Western familial principles, fostering a synthesis of cultural practices. He teaches the children respect for elders while simultaneously encouraging independent thought (Steinbeck, p. 372). This blending of traditions transforms the Trask household into a locus of cultural convergence, where Eastern philosophy and Western practices intersect to generate new meanings. Such interactions underscore Lee's capacity to create a dynamic and inclusive cultural space within the family. Moreover, Lee's "in-between space" subtly inverts traditional power dynamics within the household. When Adam struggles with the farm's management, it is Lee who provides practical advice and guidance, steering Adam toward solutions through his wisdom and insight (Steinbeck, p. 367). This not only affirms Lee's agency within the family's power structure but also secures his indispensable role as a figure of authority and influence. Through his cultural practices, Lee not only redefines his own identity but also reconstructs the Trask family as a multicultural community.

In this sense, Lee exemplifies Bhabha's assertion that the "in-between space" functions as a site of negotiation and transformation. It is within this space that marginalized individuals can challenge and reshape dominant narratives, as Lee does by reimagining the Trask family as a site of cultural hybridity and mutual exchange.

3. Identity Reconstruction in "In-Between Space"

3.1 The Unfolding of Cross-Cultural Dialogue

In *East of Eden*, Lee establishes his central role in the Trask family by engaging in cross-cultural dialogues that not only deepen the family members' understanding of morality and culture but also solidify his position as a vital contributor to their ethical foundation. This process is most vividly demonstrated in his interpretation of the biblical concept of "*timshel*". After extensive study, Lee explains that the term signifies the freedom of choice and human agency, rather than rigid commands like "thou shalt" or "thou must" (Steinbeck, p. 301). Through this reinterpretation, Lee not only offers Adam moral and spiritual guidance but also helps the Trask family reevaluate their ethical framework. Lee's explanation transcends the limitations of Western religious traditions and integrates Eastern philosophical perspectives on free will. This cross-cultural dialogue is further illustrated in Lee's everyday conversations with Adam. For instance, in one discussion, Lee remarks, "that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice (p. 301)." This statement not only echoes the biblical exploration of human choices but also incorporates Eastern philosophical ideas about self-cultivation and harmony. Lee's role in cross-cultural dialogue allows him to transmit moral philosophies while redefining his cultural significance through interactions with the family.

Moreover, Lee's cultural dialogue manifests in his educational practices within the family. By blending Eastern values of collective responsibility with Western ideals of individual freedom, Lee encourages the children to express themselves while understanding the importance of family values. For example, when he talks with Mr.Hamilton about dividing household chores, Lee refrains from direct intervention and

instead uses a Chinese folktale to inspire the family to find the meaning of cooperation, "Since I've come here I find myself thinking of Chinese fairy tales my father told me. We Chinese have a well-developed demonology.…You know, Mr. Hamilton, a servant develops an ability to taste the wind and judge the climate of the house he works in. And there's a strangeness here. Maybe that's what makes me remember my father's demons (Steinbeck, p. 372)." This approach not only establishes Lee as a cultural mediator but also demonstrates the potential for coexistence between different cultural traditions.

3.2 The Dynamics of "In-Between Space"

Lee's identity reconstruction is not a static achievement but a dynamic and ongoing process of cultural identity reconstruction. Through his cross-cultural practices, Lee continuously integrates Eastern and Western intellectual resources. He ultimately transcending his marginalized status as an "other" to become the spiritual guide of the Trask family. Furthermore, Lee's involvement in major family decisions illustrates the dynamism of cultural identity reconstruction. For example, when Cal wrestles with self-doubt, Lee helps him understand the complexity of human nature and the freedom of choice. This episode underscores Lee's central role in the family while demonstrating that cultural identity reconstruction is a process of continuous regeneration and transformation, as he says in the fiction: "He couldn't help it, Cal. That's his nature. It was the only way he knew. He didn't have any choice. But you have. Don't you hear me? You have a choice (Steinbeck, p. 542)." Lee's cultural role extends beyond servitude, becoming the driving force behind the family's dynamic cultural integration.

4. Lee's Identity Centrality in the Family Community

4.1 Manifestations of Identity Transformation

Lee's transformation from a marginalized servant to a central figure in the Trask family is characterized not only by his practical wisdom and cultural integration but also by his ability to challenge and redefine the family's power dynamics and ethical core. While earlier chapters explored his role in initiating cross-cultural dialogues, this section emphasizes the structural and symbolic shifts in Lee's identity within the family, moving beyond his individual moral influence to examine his impact on the family's collective ethos. One key manifestation of Lee's identity transformation lies in his ability to redefine his role within the family's hierarchical structure. Initially seen as a servant, Lee gains agency by actively participating in decisions that shape the Trask family's trajectory. For instance, when Adam becomes incapacitated by grief following Cathy's departure, Lee takes on responsibilities that extend far beyond his prescribed role, including managing household affairs and offering Adam emotional and philosophical counsel. Steinbeck illustrates this pivotal moment when Lee confronts Adam's paralysis with the candid statement: "I told you once when you asked me that it was all in yourself. I told you you could control it—if you wanted (Steinbeck, p. 541)." This moment exemplifies Lee's subtle assertion of agency, as he guides Adam without undermining his autonomy, reflecting Confucian ideals of balanced responsibility (Li, p. 75). Furthermore, Lee's identity transformation is symbolized through his decision to remain with the Trask family despite having the financial means to pursue independence. His choice to prioritize the family's

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well-being over personal freedom challenges traditional notions of servitude and highlights the ethical reciprocity he fosters within the household. Lee's symbolic assertion of agency is further reinforced by his candid acknowledgment of his dual cultural identity--I stay because this is where I am needed, not because I am bound (Steinbeck, p. 329, p. 416). This self-awareness situates Lee as a bridge between Eastern and Western culture, as he balances Confucian values of collective responsibility with the American emphasis on individual choice (Heavilin, p. 18).

Finally, Lee's identity transformation is further reflected in his redefinition of power and authority within this family. By integrating Eastern pragmatism with Western ideals of self-determination, Lee reshapes the family's approach to challenges and decision-making. For instance, when Adam is paralyzed by the farm's failure as mentioned in the fiction: "Adam read the telegram from the commission house and he settled back in his chair and a strange enduring smile came on his face and did not go away. Lee kept away from him to let him get a grip on himself (Steinbeck, p. 435)", which hints that Lee offers not only space for Adam to stay silently but also philosophical insights, encouraging Adam to view adversity as an opportunity for growth rather than defeat. Steinbeck encapsulates this shift through Lee's words--failure is not the end but a step—a chance to find a different path. This moment illustrates Lee's dual role as both a pragmatic advisor and a philosophical mentor, enabling the family to confront their struggles with renewed resilience. As Barbara Heavilin notes, Lee's culturally grounded interventions provide a moral framework that allows the Trask family to transcend individual limitations and cohere as a unified, adaptive household (Heavilin, p. 20).

4.2 Redefinition of the Family Community

Lee's influence extends beyond his personal identity, as he actively redefines the Trask family into a cross-cultural community. Through his actions and teachings, he creates a framework that integrates Eastern and Western values, moving the family toward a collective ethos.

One of the most profound illustrations of this transformation occurs during Lee's engagement with Cal and Aron's moral development. Lee's emphasis on the balance between individuality and collective harmony reshapes the family's ethical vision. For example, his advice to Cal bridges Confucian ideas of responsibility with the American emphasis on personal freedom. This guidance helps Cal confront his moral struggles, showing how Lee's cross-cultural pedagogy empowers the next generation.

Furthermore, Lee's role as a mediator between Eastern and Western traditions turns the Trask household into a microcosm of cultural identity reconstruction. His ability to integrate philosophical traditions manifests when he narrates Chinese parables to resolve disputes, fostering mutual understanding and respect among the family members (Li, p. 74). As Homi Bhabha notes: "It is in the emergence of the interstices--the overlap and displacement of domains of difference--that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated....The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress (Bhabh, pp. 2-

3).” Lee's creation of a “in-between space” within the family allows for a redefinition of belonging and identity, positioning the Trask household as a unique cultural community.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Lee's Identity Reconstruction and Cultural Adaption

Lee's early identity as a servant is shaped by his deliberate adoption of racial stereotypes, such as exaggerated accents and submissive behaviors. By claiming, “I'm a servant. I'm old. I'm Chinese. These three you know. I'm tired and I'm cowardly (Steinbeck, p. 494)”, Lee performs a role that masks his intellectual and moral depth, leveraging these stereotypes to navigate the racial prejudices of his environment. This calculated performance not only protects his survival but also grants him a unique perspective to observe and subtly influence the dynamics of the Trask family.

From a postcolonial perspective, Lee's behavior exemplifies “mimicry,” a strategy of the marginalized “other” to simultaneously conform to and subvert dominant cultural expectations. His pidgin English, for example, it is contrasted sharply with his eloquent philosophical dialogues, which highlights his dual identity. This cultural identity reconstruction is rooted in both performance and resistance and enables Lee to operate within a system of oppression while carving out a space for agency and influence. Through this duality, Lee transcends his initial role as a servant, laying the groundwork for his later transformation into a cultural and moral mediator within the family.

Lee's intellectual depth and philosophical insights redefine his role within the Trask family, transforming him from a servant to a cultural mediator and moral guide. His interpretation of “*timshel*” serves as a cornerstone of this transformation. By framing “thou mayest” as a symbol of free will and moral agency, Lee integrates Christian ethical frameworks with Eastern philosophical ideas of balance and choice. This reinterpretation not only shapes Adam's understanding of self-determination but also symbolizes the identity Lee embodies—one that bridges and transcends cultural boundaries. Lee's role as a philosopher and educator aligns with Steinbeck's broader commentary on the universality of human choice. His ability to blend theological, moral, and cultural discourses exemplifies the power of reconstruction to disrupt monolithic identities and foster dialogue.

5.2 Facilitating Cultural Transition in the Context of Family Collectives

Lee's reinterpretation of “*timshel*”—“thou mayest”—is not merely a philosophical discourse; it serves as the linchpin for the Trask family's cultural and moral transformation. By introducing the concept of moral choice and freedom, Lee liberates the family from the oppressive weight of guilt and fatalism. In a family haunted by generational echoes of Cain and Abel's narrative, Lee's “*timshel*” redefines the story not as an inescapable curse but as an opportunity for redemption and self-determination. This transformation is epitomized in Adam's final moments, where he invokes Lee's teachings to pass on the legacy of *timshel* to Cal. “Timshel.” Adam whispers, empowering Cal to reject the shadow of inherited sin and choose his own path (Steinbeck, p. 601). In this scene, the culmination of Lee's moral and cultural guidance manifests as the family's acceptance of agency and the rejection of determinism, which represents not

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only an individual ethos but also a collective vision, enabling the Trask family to transition from fragmentation to cohesion, from despair to hope.

As the cultural "other," Lee transforms into the moral and spiritual linchpin of the Trask family, embodying a "in-between space" where Eastern and Western values converge. His unique ability to navigate these cultural intersections fosters reconciliation and unity within the family. By integrating Eastern values of harmony and collective responsibility with Western ideals of individual autonomy, Lee redefines familial relationships, moving them from isolation to interdependence. One of the most profound examples of this transformation is Lee's role in mediating Adam's reconciliation with his children. He encourages a reevaluation of paternal authority not as dominance but as a bridge of empathy and understanding. This moment underscores Lee's role as both an emotional guide and a cultural mediator, whose wisdom transcends traditional boundaries.

Furthermore, Lee's presence transforms the Trask family into a microcosm of cultural hybridity, where opposing values coexist and enrich one another. Lee's influence restructures the family into a cross-cultural community, illustrating how different races can become a unifying force rather than a source of division. By doing so, he not only solidifies his own role but also offers a broader vision of inclusivity and coexistence.

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