

# SEARCH FOR ORIGIN: NAVIGATING TO FIND THE REAL ROOTS IN LISA KO'S THE LEAVERS AND NICOLE CHUNG'S ALL YOU CAN EVER KNOW: A MEMOIR OF ADOPTION

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## Abstract

Transracial adoption involves placing children from a particular race and ethnic group with parents of different race and ethnicity than their own. This difference often puts the transracial adoptees in a state where they question their own identity. They always live in a dilemma pondering over the thought that they neither belong to their native culture nor to their adoptive culture. Both Lisa Ko's *The Leavers* and Nicole Chung's *All You Can Ever Know: A memoir of adoption* portrays the hardships and internal conflicts faced by transracial adoptees in their struggles to assimilate into the new environment. Thus, the analysis of the books depicts issues of identity crisis faced by transracial adoptees, their journey of self-discovery and questioning of their identity. The prejudiced views of society in turn put them in situations where they questioned their self-worth. But ultimately with the love and support of people around them they could regain confidence in their sense of self. It proved the crucial role played by people, in the identity formation of a transracial adoptee. Thus, the paper proves that social support from family and friends could reduce the negative impact of identity crisis in a transracial adoptee. The paper also seeks to prove that transracial adoptees face more identity crisis than same race adoptees. The paper also looks for the causes and consequences of a transracial adoptee's identity crisis. Thus, the paper could promote awareness about the problems of transracial adoptees and thereby create a more inclusive society.

Keywords: Transracial, Adoptee, Identity, Society.

Identity constitutes what a person is, but sometimes due to certain circumstances one may fail to understand their real identity. They may find it difficult to have a stable identity and feel like their life fluctuates between two identities. But ultimately somehow, they may discover a way to get assimilated and embrace their identity as it is. Each person has their own unique identity which cannot be questioned by others because it usually develops from the situations they have grown up. Thus, another individual may not understand the way a person's identity is developed or the struggles they face to have a definite identity.

Usually, immigrants struggle to adjust to the foreign land in which they live and confront identity crisis during the assimilation process. So, when it comes to transracial adoptees, their problems are doubled since they are both transracial immigrants to a new place and at the same time adoptees too. As a result, their identity formation will be much more complex than that of same race adoptees or immigrants. One of the pathetic fates of the adoptees is that they don't even get a chance to choose whether to get adopted and move to a new place or to stay in their own land as it is the circumstances which push them towards such a life which they cannot change but to finally get accustomed. "I wasn't afraid of getting married, nor was I afraid of remaining single; what I feared was the threat of passivity—being powerless, like I had been as a baby, to determine my own future" (Chung 81).

Though the children adapt physically into the new family and the life they got mentally they might be still longing for their

birth family. That's why both Daniel and Nicole went in search of their family when they got a chance.

The decision to search also varies with the personality of each adopted person. Where one may be merely curious, another may have an inordinate spirit of adventure while another, challenged by the forbidden, must defy authority. All successful searches require determination and persistence on the part of adoptees. Those aided by their parents are fortunate. (Borges 102)

For Daniel, the reason which prompted him to search for his mother was his desire to find out why his mother left him without any reason. He doubted himself for the abandonment. He felt that he might have done something which made his mother to leave him. His self-doubt gave him the courage to find out the truth behind his abandonment. But, for Nicole, the reason which tempted her was to find the medical history of her birth parents. As Nicole got pregnant and was about to deliver a baby it was necessary to know about the health background to find out whether the baby is healthy. It was the reason which she used as a curtain to hide her real desire to find her family. She really did want to find her roots and with this reason it supported her desire.

Adoption affected Daniel more, than in the case of Nicole. Since Daniel was eleven, he had a brief idea about his birth family and culture. But since Nicole was only a few months old, she didn't have any idea about her birth parents or culture at first. She only knew the physical difference that she won't look like her family when she grew up. Daniel was also not ready for such a quick transition in his life. The disappearance of his mother from his

life itself was something big for him to adjust with and at the same time him being kept for adoption added more fuel to the burning pain of his mind. He never knew what was really happening in his life.

‘The Americans will take good care of you. They have a big house and lots of money.’

‘I already have a family.’

‘Your old family isn’t here anymore. This is your new family. Relax. Everything will be okay.’

Peter and Kay Wilkinson squatted on the steps. ‘Deming,’ Kay said. ‘We’re going to take care of you. It’s going to be okay.’ (Ko 56)

At first, Kay and Peter Wilkinson adopted Daniel as his foster parents. After some time, they were sure that none would come in search of Daniel and thus they did the legal procedures and became his adoptive parents. Daniel didn’t realise it was his reality and thought that everything is like a temporary dream.

*Adopt.* There was a similar term in Chinese, yet Deming hadn’t thought of his time with Peter and Kay to be anything but vaguely temporary, like the stay with Yi Gong had been vaguely temporary. Even the name Daniel Wilkinson seemed like an outfit he would put on for an unspecified period of time, until he returned to his real name and home planet. Where that real home was, however, was no longer certain. (Ko 92-93)

Daniel was unaware of the meaning of neither foster child nor adoption. This made him curious that he took out his laptop and searched in an online dictionary and found out the meaning:

*Foster child:* A child looked after temporarily or brought up by people other than his or her natural or adoptive parents.

*Adoption:* A process whereby a person assumes the parenting for another and, in so doing, permanently transfers all rights and responsibilities from the original parent or parents. Adoption is intended to effect a permanent change in status, through legal sanction. (Ko 93)

It took him some time to comprehend the meaning and finally he felt like the words just expanded “Temporarily” and “Permanent”. This is because foster care gives a temporary authority over the child and adoption creates a permanent bond and authority. Though he realised that’s his fate and it can’t be changed he found it difficult to assimilate at first. Sometimes he had a feeling that “These people were strangers. He couldn’t trust them” (Ko 89). He cannot be criticised for these thoughts as his own mother, the most trusted person, leaving him on a fine day without any trace created such a great void in his mind which in turn affected his personality as it became difficult for him to trust people easily. “Parents and other family members have strong influence on the personality, *i.e.* child. Parents have more effect on the personality development as compared to other members of the family” (Bhatia 18).

Daniel had a slight hope in his mind that his mother would return in search of him. “‘Face it,’ Vivian finally said. ‘Your mother isn’t coming back’ and you need a good family. I can’t provide for both you and Michael right now. I’m sorry, Deming” (Ko 53). The words of Vivian shattered his hopes before he was kept for adoption. Vivian can’t be blamed, as living as an immigrant with a low income it would have been difficult for her to meet the needs of two children at a time. Everyone tried to make their life better and forgot to comfort Daniel for his misfortune. At times he himself tried to comfort him. “If Michael had information about his mother, it wouldn’t change the fact that she had left him. Roland was right. There was no need to stir up bad memories” (Ko 37). He himself tried to believe that the memory of the past is bad as it could hurt his feelings. But no

matter how much he tried to forget sometimes he also wondered whether his mother would think about him.

Similarly, Nicole often wonders whether her birth parents remember about her or will they try to keep in touch with her. But in both cases it’s seen that the children suffer more pain of loss than the parents. They are the ones shedding their identity in order to belong to the newly formed identity which they have got. She often wondered “Why hadn’t my adoption transformed me into the person I felt I was?” (Chung 26). Though she felt herself to be one among the people around her, others couldn’t see her to be one among them. They always considered her to be “different”. The only way she tried to cope with the situation is to put on a masked identity. “If I still felt I did not belong, I decided I could not allow others to see it” (Chung 27). She really struggled for acceptance and sense of belonging:

And I couldn’t lie to myself about why I struggled to feel I belonged in my own life; not since the day I’d finally asked a classmate why she didn’t like me, and she pulled her eyes back and said, “The same reason no one else likes you.” No matter how many answers I doled out or how much I prayed for acceptance. I was never going to grow out of being Korean in a white town. (Chung 46)

Usually, the adoptive parents were not in favour of the children searching for their birth parents. As Nicole said, “No one in my family ever referred to my birth parents as my real parents” (Chung 19). The adoptive parents themselves become the real parents and never make the child feel the absence of their birth parents. When they adopted Nicole the social worker told them, “‘Just assimilate her into your family,’” he said, “and everything will be fine. She’s yours now” (Chung 41). Her parents took these words to heart and treated her as their own.

It might be their inner fear that when the children meet their birth parents, they will get attached to them and will eventually leave them for their birth parents. It might be their possessiveness which made them hold back the children from searching for their birth parents. But once they reach maturity and could distinguish between what is right and wrong for them the adoptive parents never indulged in their decision to search for their family. It might be because they are aware of the fact that the children are mature enough to choose what is right for them and it is wrong on their part if they again prevent the children from finding the truth.

The words of Kay, “‘I’m afraid to get too attached. The aunt or the mother, they could come back for him anytime’” (Ko 67) when they were Daniel’s foster parents showed the anxiety in her mind whether the birth family will take the child away from them. It might be like a kind of anxious attachment where they are always afraid of losing the child. This might be the reason which prompted them to become his adoptive parents rather than just being foster parents. Like an adoptee who always wonders whether he will be a good child who could meet the needs of his adoptive parents, here Kay also wonders whether she will be a good mom.

I need to make him meals and buy him clothes and make sure I’m loving and caring and patient so I don’t mess him up more than he already is. I’m afraid I’m too old to learn how to be the kind of mother who gives everything up to mom. Even foster mom. I’m using mom as a verb here, in case you can’t tell.’ (Ko 90)

It shows Kay’s inner dilemma about her motherhood. This also depicts that the confused thought of whether they are good enough to each other exists not only in the mind of adoptees but also in the mind of adoptive parents too. For them also it is their first experience of being a parent of a transracial adoptee.

Similarly, Nicole's adoptive parents too feared a separation that could happen if they keep in touch with the birth parents. Thus, they tried to cut all the threads of connection.

"We weren't even sure what questions to ask when she reached out through the lawyer," Mom admitted. "The idea of sharing you with them scared us. We never wanted or planned to be in contact with your birth family, and we didn't know how to support you in a more open adoption." (Chung 232).

Though Nicole doesn't have any idea about her birth parents except for the fact that they were Korean she searched for her mother in every Asian woman she saw. "Every time we passed an Asian woman around my mother's age, I could not help but wonder if she might be my mother. A relative, at least, or perhaps just someone who'd known my birth family" (Chung 49) depicts the inner yearning in the mind of an adoptee to find their birth family. But when she visited her birth city she never felt at home as she was only a tourist there. "For days and months afterward, for years, I would think about our visit to the city of my birth and wonder how a town I saw only through the eyes of a tourist could feel like home" (Chung 52). Nicole always wished to see her mother among the crowd and have a miraculous reunion.

In passing, I imagined, my birth mother and I would both suddenly be aware of a connection, unexpected and undeniable. Something in her would call out to me. I'd look into her face, overcome by a flash of familiarity, a memory woken. It seemed impossible that we would be able to cross paths like strangers and keep moving down the sidewalk away from each other, never to know, never to meet again. (Chung 50)

These struggles in getting assimilated into the new family and land as well as the thoughts and memories about the birth family put the transracial adoptees in a state of existential crisis. Transracial adoptees too felt their life to be meaningless. Because of their existential anxiety they were always afraid to confront the question of existence. They felt that their life is devoid of any meaning as they cannot realise the purpose. They therefore face existential angst because of the thought that their life is absurd, and they couldn't fit into their new life. Their existence was also driven by existential despair as they internally felt that being a transracial adoptee their life will always be meaningless and hopeless in the post-colonial world.

They always longed for belonging and getting welcomed by everyone around them. "And wouldn't it be wonderful to go to sleep one night and wake up an entirely different person, one who would be loved and welcomed everywhere? Wouldn't it be wonderful to look at your face in the mirror and know you would always belong?" (Chung 26). They might have thought that if they are with their birth family they will get the feeling of belonging rather than being "different". But though they always wished for a reunion they also loved their adoptive parents and wished to be with them as they were the ones who held their hand when no one was there for them. "As a child, I recalled, sometimes I'd had nightmares about my birth parents showing up to take me with them" (Chung 64). It shows their existential anxiety. They wished to see their birth parents but at the same time the meeting was something nightmarish for them.

The sudden shift of life situations had put Daniel in an existential despair. When Roland asked "Did your mom die, too? Your real mom." Daniel without a second thought replied "Yeah" (Chung 74). He himself doesn't know why he said so. Later he felt sorry for it and said sorry to his mother in his thoughts when he was alone in his room. It might be his desperate situation that prompted him to tell such a big lie. Similarly, Nicole too faced existential despair. She often wondered, "...If I'd have had the courage to tell my Korean parents what I had never told my

adoptive parents. I wondered if they might have understood me, or at least understood that pain, better than my white family" (Chung 65).

For Daniel his birth family was something which he had known for years, but for Nicole she was unaware of the details of her birth family. Taking that fact into consideration people tried to tell her not to be upset over something which she never knew. "Some might say I shouldn't grieve for the years we missed, for how can you miss something, someone, you've never known? Yet I still feel it, all the time, especially as I watch my own two daughters chatter and play and grow up together" (Chung 227). What Nicole felt to be a great loss was her childhood with Cindy, her sister. Only after the reunion, they got the chance to get to know each other. But later she realized that no matter how much time they lost, the fact of being together now is important.

Though we'd forged a different bond than siblings who grew up together, it was, I now understood, no less important for being so new. It didn't matter how different we were, how much we had missed, how long we'd been apart. We had been family once, and now we would be again. We were sisters, at last, because we had decided we should be. (Chung 197)

Nicole began the search for her birth family to find out whether there were any hereditary issues as she was pregnant, and it is important to know about it to keep safety measures for the baby during pregnancy. When she started her search, she came to know from Donna that her birth parents have told everyone including her sister that she died due to premature birth. Earlier she thought about them as "strong, selfless people who had sacrificed the chance to know and raise me so I could have a better life" (Chung 112). But after hearing the heart-breaking news she felt herself to be betrayed by her biological parents. This again added to her feeling of existential crisis. She questioned the purpose of her own existence.

This was worse than hearing about my birth parents' divorce, worse than wondering if they would have preferred a boy to "another girl." Had I been easier to give up because I hadn't been healthy? Had they really spent the years since the adoption denying my existence to everyone—even my own sisters? If so, what kind of people did that make them? (Chung 111)

For Daniel in his first few days after getting adopted, he found it difficult to address Kay and Peter as Mom and Dad as he already had someone whom he addressed the same before. But in the case of Nicole as she never had any previous connection to her birth family, and when she began to write an email to her biological mother for the first time, she felt it weird to address her own birth mother as mom. It depicts the existential angst she faced.

I couldn't erase that greeting fast enough. It still felt wrong to refer to another woman as *Mom*, and I shouldn't claim my birth mother as family when I had no idea how she thought of me. But the opening was a dilemma: I didn't know her last name, or whether she went by Ms. or Mrs. (Chung 116)

Another incident which added more to her existential crisis was that both her parents told different stories as reason for her adoption, and she was unsure whom she should believe. "Was I to believe the woman who hurt her daughter, or the man who said I was dead? The woman who'd tried to reach out to me when I was a child, or the man who told me he wept when he saw my picture?" (Chung 168). Later she knew from Cindy that her father's side of the story was true. She even felt grateful to her father for his choice of putting her for adoption. "But my father's belief that adoption was truly the best option in a sea of imperfect ones is something of which I am now certain. I believe

it was the only thing he thought he could do for me—perhaps even the most loving thing” (Chung 220).

Though after certain experiences and circumstances the adoptees adjust with their new life, they always have an urge to question their birth parents for giving them away for adoption. No matter how hard they try to cope with the new life, the pain of being left by the people who should have taken care of them hurts them a lot. This is evident from Nicole’s life because, though she patched up her relationship with her birth father, she felt the need to question him when she first met him, but she kept her emotions in her mind.

Still, when we finally met face-to-face at my sister’s house, I wish I’d been brave enough to ask him just one more question. *Did you want to keep me?* Not *Did you see me as your responsibility?* Not *Would you have kept me if things had been different?*—but *Did you want me?* (Chung220)

Similarly, Daniel also wanted to ask his mother why she went to China, but he too never got a chance to ask.

Once, when he and Angel had been talking about their birth families, she had asked if he still wanted to find his mother, and he said no, not anymore. It was enough for him to accept that she was gone. But he’d never had the chance to ask her why she returned to China – she hated Minjiang – or to understand why he ended up in Ridgeborough. (Ko 116)

Though the transracial adoptees always feel that they could never forgive their birth parents for giving them up and putting them in such a complex state. But once the time of reunion comes, they will never feel the same. They will forget about all the grudges they had in their mind. It shows how innocent their love is. “It was a funny thing, forgiveness. You could spend years being angry with someone and then realize you no longer felt the same, that your usual mode of thinking had slipped away when you weren’t noticing” (Ko 383-384).

Though the adoptees live miles away from their real parents the traces of them always remain with them. Polly listened to music when she had a hard time in her life. Daniel too had a great love towards music and even wanted to have a career related to it. And for Nicole it was a surprise to know that her love for writing was a family trait as both her father and sister too had the same habit.

When I reconnected with my birth family, I had been surprised to learn that my sister wrote poems and stories in her free time, while our father was a published author, a lover of language, and a scholar of Korean literature and linguistics. My own lifelong obsession with writing was a shared family trait, the inheritance of what I was told were generations of scholars and writers. (Chung 209-210)

This fact of acquiring a similar character even created a trauma in the mind of Nicole as she came to know from her father and Cindy that her mother was abusive.

Many parents identify with their own parents and carry out patterns of behaviour they condemned in their parents. Since identification with another person often create an unconscious need to react similarly, unfortunate behaviour may persist for several generations. (Bose 34)

This created a self-doubt in her that whether she too will be an abusive mother to her children. She started wondering whether she will also beat her children and never care for them like her mother did to Cindy. She feared if she had the ability to love her child or will she become like her birth mother. “I get mad, and I yell—what if that’s from *her*? What if I’m just angry at my kid all the time? Cindy said our mother was always angry. What if there’s—I don’t know, a child abuse gene, and she passed it on to me and I hurt my baby?” (Chung 142)

It shows that though distance may separate them there will always be an internal connection that will be alive within both. Though Nicole comments about her adoptive parents as, “My parents had met me when I was two and a half months old. They didn’t spend nine months anticipating or preparing for my birth; they didn’t experience the high drama of labor or those sweet moments of relief just after delivery” (Chung 158-159) it was them who really did something big. They were the ones who decided to give a new life to a transracial kid knowing all the consequences they may face from society. Though they were not in favour of Nicole searching for her birth family they told to help her if she needed any. “I always understood that my parents didn’t want me to search. Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say I understood that they didn’t want *me* to search. I was enough for them, and they wanted to be enough for me” (Chung 86).

It shows how much good character they had. Similarly, Kay and Peter also never restricted Daniel from going to his birth mother. When he stayed with his birth mother, they never tried to call him back or tried to make the situation hard for him. Once Polly interfered in between the call, hearing Kay calling him Daniel and said that “His name is Deming, not Daniel” (Ko 381). It really made Peter and Kay sad, but they didn’t say a word against it as they knew anyway, she was his birth mother. Thus, it can be said that, both Daniel and Nicole got really understanding adoptive parents who looked after them as their own children.

Both the cases the adoptive parents seem to be selfless while the birth parents seem to be selfish who only cared for their way of living. Though Nicole’s father kept her for adoption to save her from her abusive mother, after the divorce he could have searched for her and created a bond with her without waiting for her to look after them. And in Daniel’s case though Polly says, “I loved you more than anyone. You could call another lady ‘Mama’, but I was your mama, not her. I knew I had forfeited the right to say that, but it was never going to change” (Ko 270) it can simply be seen as a manipulative technique where she is blaming him but the person who did wrong was her.

If she had really meant what she said she would have come looking for him. The reason she said was that her new husband may get angry and she would have lost her new life if she started looking for him, “If I called you, and If Yong found out I had lied about having a child, he would be so angry, and then he would leave me, and I would have to give up being myself” (Ko 143). She thought like this because her priority was to have a stable life rather than to search for her child. Thus, it may seem that the birth parents are more busy building their own life, than searching for their child. It might also be because they wished to remain invisible. “A popular myth is that birth parents do not wish to be found” (Ganmrill and Stein 226)

After years of facing identity crisis and existential problems, finally, the transracial adoptees will reach a state of reconciliation with their new life and circumstances. They will leave behind the memories which kept them from moving forward in their present. The resilience they have reached is a peaceful state, where they are ready to accept themselves the way they are. Its visible from the way Nicole explains to her daughter what adopted means:

“If you’re adopted, like me, it means you need someone to be your mama or daddy, and someone else wants to take care of you and be your parent,” I said. “So instead of being born to my parents, I was born to other parents first, and then Grandma and Grandpa took care of me.” (Chung 222)

Nicole was also happy that she took a step to find her real family and understood all the truths behind her adoption. “I won’t ever regret my search or my reunion; how both opened up new



possibilities while closing others. I am thankful to know my birth father, even just a little; to have met Cindy and talked with Jessica” (Chung 235). Likewise, Daniel too comes to a reconciliation with his life. When he lived with his birth mother he felt “like someone else’s life” so he came back to Peter and Kay and finally had the realization that it is where he really belongs.

With the reunion, the adoptive parents too understood that the children love them more and won’t ever leave them for their birth parents. They realized the fact that it is the adoptive parents who brought them up into the present state when nobody was there for them. And one will not become a parent by just giving birth; only the efforts after to bring up the child to his new life is what matters. Thus, the adoptive parents are finally able to leave behind their fear and anxiety that the children may leave them. Reunion has done more than restore relationships that had once been beyond my ability to fully imagine; it has enabled a shift in existing ones. It has forced my adoptive parents to think about my birth parents not as poor, pitiable immigrants or people who might steal me away, but real people with their own feelings, fears, and failings. (Chung 235)

Thus, both Nicole’s and Daniel’s decision to search for their birth family was right as it helped them to focus on their present and future rather than holding on to the unchangeable past. Knowing the reality behind keeping them for adoption put them at ease, as it made them understand that it had nothing to do with them. This realization in turn helped them to keep away their attitude of self-blame and self-doubt and embrace the way they are. Thus, Lisa Ko’s *The Leavers* and Nicole Chung’s *All You Can Ever Know: A memoir of adoption* portrays the search of transracial adoptees to find their real family with the hope to find themselves and their real identity.

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