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The Separation of Immigrants and Governments in Mystery-Solving

With her novel *The Interpreter*, Suki Kim admirably brings certain issues surrounding minorities and immigrants in the United States to light. She maintains the enthralling nature of murder mysteries while also encouraging the audience to be attentive to the barriers that continue to close in on immigrant communities—in this case, the Korean community in New York City. Kim's protagonist, Suzy, seeks to find out more about the reasoning and details behind her parents' murder, as well as the background of their whole unclear life. The police didn't want to be very involved in the case, quickly brushing it off as a random shooting by thugs. Kim highlights interactions between the police and immigrants to depict their strained relationship, and to emphasize how and why the Korean immigrants severely fear and avoid interacting with the government. This widens the rift between them, creating two very different worlds that erupt in complex challenges when they meet. Suzy embarks on solo quests to answer her questions, follows her own inklings and impulsive decisions, and uncovers much more by herself than an outsider—the police—does. In this way, the reality that her role as a member of this intricately nuanced group of people is crucial to discovering the truth grows more visible. Kim strongly depicts the isolation and the marginalization of a protagonist who is part of an immigrant group in order to highlight the importance of individual community members' involvement in solving a murder mystery, as opposed to the police's/government's involvement.

In crafting a character with identifiable tendencies, Kim depicts Suzy as a sort of lone detective who lives a lot in her own mind, consciously follows the interpretations she perceives, and pursues these somewhat spontaneously. Suzy is very intuitive and seems to often be suspicious about occurrences even when it may not seem like one needs to be: “Just a gut feeling. No evidence to the contrary, no reason to disbelieve...” (Kim 103). Her gut brings up random realizations or memories that spark a closer step towards discovery, even though there is no obvious reason why she remembered them—“It is ‘DJ’ that stops her heart. The name has stuck with her from the first time she heard it. For no reason, really” (Kim 145). Suzy’s inner inklings lead the way and the audience is taken along on this journey inside her mind, thoughts, and feelings. She impulsively visits places that hold significance in the uncovering of the truth— “It is then that the thought flashes across her mind [...] why not just go there[?]”—such as the high school where Grace teaches and Montauk, where her parents’ ashes were scattered (Kim 76). These solo adventures, so to speak, lead Suzy down winding roads towards answers; roads that she travels alone. The jigsaw puzzle pieces she picks up along the way are only clear and evident to her. The unfolding of steps from one conversation to a spontaneous trip come about from her determination and ability to figure things out by herself. In these patterns of behavior, Kim reveals Suzy’s isolated way of identifying clues about her family and following new discoveries.

Along with these depictions of character, Kim outlines the isolation by conveying to the audience that Suzy is the only one really going after the mystery and attempting to solve it. In her initial conversation with Mr. Lee, he says that “[e]ven the police wouldn’t touch the case” (Kim 64). In a study named “Immigrant status and neighborhood context on perceptions of police procedural justice”, the authors wrote that there are “serious challenges in police attempts to engage immigrant communities in crime control and partnership-building activities” (Yuan et al. 1660). The article’s content involves the understudied

relations between the police and immigrant communities, which the authors describe as “longstanding strain”, further isolating members of these groups involved in mysteries like Suzy’s (Yuan et al. 1660, 1661). The audience learns in later parts of the novel that a very plausible reason as to why the police neglected the case is because they were using Suzy’s parents as their “snitches” before they were killed (Kim 159). They became “so eager now to pin the murder on those ex—KK members”, to push away the trace and responsibility and get the case over with (Kim 159). On top of law enforcement being unwilling to get very involved, Grace is not in contact with Suzy, and hasn’t been since the funeral. This is a journey Suzy takes alone, albeit with people on the side and at certain crossroads. She appears to be the only character seeking the full truth, finding possible clues, and being actively skeptical and inquisitive. Grace supposedly does know how their parents were killed and who is responsible, but she herself is also a mystery that Suzy is keen on solving.

At the end of the novel, when Suzy eerily says “I know who killed my parents” to Detective Lester, she remains the only one between herself and the detective (and one of very few, generally) who holds the ultimate answer, the below-the-surface truth that her eventful, isolated journey brought her to (Kim 193). This further deepens the separation between her and the authorities, as they are misled by her false accusations and will most likely persecute the named people without questioning deeper. While the question of her reasoning behind this seemingly contradictory decision remains important, Yuan and coauthors importantly point out that “subordinate groups of society, including foreign-born individuals, may view the police more negatively” and are therefore less likely to be inclined to collaborate with them (1660, 1661). Although Suzy seems to be siding with the government instead of her community through submitting the false accusations, this is still a noteworthy point. Despite her ultimate betrayal, the audience knows that it doesn’t mean she is fond of or friendly with the law enforcers— “they haven’t even tried [...] This incompetent detective,” Suzy thinks

during her meeting with Detective Lester (Kim 119). She still withholds true information from the police and it is her negative perception of them, her knowledge that they will persecute her community, that allows her to confidently place the blame on innocent individuals. Suzy has the complete understanding of what happened and what led up to it in her family's past, as well as the meaningful effects of this, and chooses to keep this information isolated with her. The truth stays inside the community.

Crucial to this discussion of police-immigrant relationships is the marginalization of immigrant communities and those within it when in situations of unsolved crime. Kim continuously highlights the deep fracture between the two and the wariness held by the minorities throughout the book. A noteworthy and unfortunately true statement in the novel is that “illegal immigrants [are] the cheapest target before the law”—constantly pursued and confined (Kim 159). As Yuan and coauthors state, “immigrants are discriminated against by the police and criminal justice institutions” through the experience of “racialized and unfair policing” which works to “limit [their] rights” (1660, 1661). Kim hones in on this concept by specifying the experiences of the particular Korean community present in this story. The only time the government pays keen attention to this immigrant community is when there are possible deportees to be found and dealt with. Racism and the connected desire to reduce the number of immigrants drive the oppressive trap they live in. In a journal entry called “From State-Sanctioned Removal to the Right to the City: The Policing of Asian Immigrants in Southern Brooklyn, 1987–1995”, Vivian Truong discusses a “[long] history of racist violence and exclusion” including “a multitude of police violence cases against Asian Americans” in New York City (62). This harmful attitude also exists in the form of ignorance when it comes to matters that the community cares about and may need assistance in. A lack of prioritization is dominant as Suzy points out when she states that “It ha[d] been years since she last heard from Detective Lester, not since the case was filed away unsolved, which he never admitted”

(Kim 56). The police didn't have a motive for five years to solve the case, leaving it to "[gather] dust among the forgotten files," until they decide to desperately pin it on a gang in an attempt to get it off their hands (Kim 116). In writing about these conditions, Kim describes a reality that many people face and enhances Suzy as the body through whom we view their marginalization.

Fear is inevitably a prevalent factor in these complex relationships and perceptions that immigrants have towards the government, and Kim emphasizes this to carve out the rift and to depict how negatively complicated it can get when the two groups do converge. The power of this emotion is accurately depicted when Kim writes and Suzy thinks: "the fear, the absolutely mind-numbing fright, that a mere mention of the INS brings to those whose underground existence [...] is a source of collective paranoia" (158). The INS is painted as a ruthless, inhumane entity that is eager to send people back to the countries they moved away from—"the iron gate of America" (Kim 124). It wreaks havoc in the world they have struggled to build for themselves and destroys numerous lives without a glance back, consequently becoming an active, dominant enemy to society. The immigrants and the authorities seem irreversibly placed in opposing, separate positions, where fright and threat fill in that gap. When Suzy's parents report their own people, it is like an unbelievable horror that gives rise to a loss of trust and cruel superiority. Tanya Golash-Boza's book *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor and Global Capitalism* makes a good observation about these effects: "these laws and practices create new hierarchies and delimit the lives of immigrants" (167-168). Among these situations, fear guides, or rather controls, people's lifestyles and actions. Suzy lives as the product of what this fear can do—marginalizing whole groups of people, subjecting them to lives of hiding and terror in an overall disempowered portion of society.

The fearful relationship and imbalanced superiority-inferiority structure contributes to the mystery being better solved by a member of the actual community. Because of the government's actions and purposeful intimidation, the immigrant community is unable to form a real sense of trust towards them and reach out if they are in need. Detective Lester reinforces this idea in a conversation with Suzy: "Koreans don't tend to trust policemen. They don't wanna tell us anything, which unfortunately doesn't help your parents' case" (Kim 122). They are understandably reluctant to share pieces of themselves and their lives with a group that is constantly prosecuting them. A research article titled "Spillover Effects: Immigrant Policing and Government Skepticism in Matters of Health for Latinos" that looks at this lack of trust's effects for immigrants in the United States articulates well that "immigration enforcement policies, and policing practices more broadly, need to be developed and implemented in ways that do not violate community trust so that [...] resources remain accessible and approachable in a democratic society" (Nichols et al. 441). Immigrants aren't enabled to get closer to and trust government-associated institutions, policies, and groups. They are instead "[deterred] [...] from reporting information that is critical for solving crimes" (Nichols et al. 432). The doubt and hesitation further strains ties between the two sides, making the police less likely to successfully work with and solve community crime cases.

Therefore, although the immigrant community is disempowered, Suzy does have a sort of power or advantage in that she is part of this oppressed group, and can peek through holes and see through cultural curtains that the police cannot. There are walls around this minority community, meaning that things are harder for them to access, but also meaning that having a full understanding of its inner workings can only be done from within. Suzy recalls details about the Korean immigrant gang and their connection to Grace, and she is able to explore this by visiting the pool hall and salon where she can interact with related individuals,

such as Mina. She's able to lie and pretend to be a gang member's girlfriend, allowing her to dig deeper into the conversation than an intimidating policeman would be able to. Mina may be suspicious, but still lets Suzy in on information and speaks with her in a way that suggests they have some sort of similarity or connection that would contrastingly only broaden the gap between Mina and the law enforcement—"Then, fixing Suzy with a nearly pleading look, she adds [...]" (Kim 152). An individual who was a sort of representative of the government would not have been able to accomplish acquiring the insight Suzy did, which led her to discover Grace's relationship and the possibility of the lover being the murderer.

Suzy also really knows the cultural contexts surrounding all aspects of the story, including about other people, the physical environments, the norms and nuances of Korean immigrant culture, and more, as displayed in phrases like: "too fancy for this neighborhood" and "Koreans marry early. A woman is expected to [...]" (Kim 150, 165). She is continuously aware of the details of how Korean immigrants live, and always applies this knowledge consciously and subconsciously to figure her way through situations involving familiar components. Within understanding this culture, Suzy inevitably has interacted closely with the fearful ways the community grapples with the looming threat of deportation. It has to be taken into account as a significant part of the lifestyles her family and others around her lead. The threat is always there—as Golash-Boza states, "this criminalization produces fear [...]" now millions of people are subject to arrest in the course of carrying out mundane tasks such as driving, working, sitting at home watching television" (168-169). Truong, in response to the complex cultural and political climates, asserts that we need "a nuanced political analysis to understand" the nuances of immigrant life, pain, and culture (84). Suzy, albeit living through the manipulation of a malicious system, understands the workings of the community and the mysteries more because of that.

The plot and character details presented in *The Interpreter* together weave a layered picture of the difficult lives Korean immigrants in the US lead. Suki Kim designs Suzy as an isolated detective who seeks out discoveries impulsively and follows the nuanced clues that no one else seems to. She and her community are marginalized by the police—ostracized as people that need constant monitoring but solely in a negative form. The law enforcement abandons the community when they are in need of help, such as with murder cases, and only project their focus onto the immigrants when searching for deportees. This threat invades the community's lives and, as with Suzy's parents' situation, turns fear into betrayal, terror, and death. Furthermore, the police are unable to come into as close contact with the community's subtle cultural details as someone actually from within. Suzy is more in touch with the community, and consequently has more useful realizations, ideas, and familiarity that promote progress in uncovering the truth. Kim's portrayal of her isolation and marginalization therefore serves to show that a member of a targeted minority/immigrant community is the most crucial individual role in solving criminal mysteries, particularly instead of law enforcement bodies.

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