'NATIVE SPEAKER', A NOVEL IMBUED WITH EXISTENTIAL DICHOTOMIES EMBODIED BY VIBRANT CHARACTERS

Andreea Iliescu
Senior Lecturer, PhD., University of Craiova

Abstract:The present paper is meant to address issues like embarking on a journey for self-discovery, reconciling one's past and present, assessing and reassessing identity in terms of ethnicity and cultural assimilation. Furthermore, I underscore that Chang-rae Lee's novel projects characters who are torn between emotional deflation and expansion, in the middle of an increasingly fragmentary narrative, therefore 'Native Speaker' appeals to me as a literary work inviting readers to delve into a realm of thorny issues relative to alienation and identity crises. By the same token, I maintain that we can also approach the novel in terms of its seemingly challenging language underlying a deafening silence, and of its convincingly puzzled out plot, infused with all kinds of incongruities akin to the XXth century urban jungle behaviour.

Keywords: identity crisis, estrangement, self-discovery.

1. Chang-rae Lee's Background

Born in Seoul, South Korea, on July 29, 1965, Chang-Rae Lee moved three years later to the United States with his parents. He grew up in Westchester, NewYork, in a bilingual household, attended PhillipsExeterAcademy in New Hampshire, and graduated from YaleUniversity with a bachelor's in English in 1987. Afterward he travelled to the University of Oregon where he completed an MFA in fiction in 1993. His first novel, *Native Speaker* (1995) won the American Book Award and the PEN/Hemingway Award and considers the tense web of paternal, marriage and political loyalties in the life of a Korean American who works in an American espionage ring. (Huang, 2009: 595)

As Seiwoong Oh maintains, 'Lee's novels […] explore the challenges of inclusion, featuring mixed-race families and characters who must struggle to define their identities.' (Oh, 2007: 161)

Referring to *Native Speaker's* protagonist, the literary critic, Guiyou Huang, spotlights the nature of his efforts to untangle the Chinese puzzle-like existence: "Exploring the impossible stance of a person caught between more than one culture and more than one set of expectations, Lee examines the political cultural of immigrant or 'hyphenated' groups, filial drama, and the realistic communication gaps inherent not only in any marriage but essentially in an interracial one." (Huang, 2009: 596)

2. Native Speaker, a Novel Dissipating Certainties

Native Speaker unfolds as a back and forth journey, enlivening readers to venture into Lee's quivering literary universe.

The novel's complex style, infused with countless metaphors - a genuine piece of linguistic embroidery-, lends itself to paradigm change. Despite foregrounding immigrant-related issues, acclimatization challenges and the like, Chang-rae Lee's novel prompts a predominantly mainstream American readership, thus bypassing a stereotypical approach to these topics.

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Belonging to dissimilar cultural backgrounds amounts to being at odds with each other in more than one situation. In a similar vein, even apparently innocuous statements, in certain contexts, catapult Lelia and Henry to compelling arguments.

Lee's ubiquitous narrative 'I' person strives to reconcile snapshots of the past with a crumbling present. Furthermore, with the wisdom of hindsight, some startling confessions succeed in getting aligned with current quagmires and, why not, even with future aspirations.

Enmeshed in the industrial espionage business, Henry Park is also grappling with Lelia's wanderlust, portrayed as a self-explanatory behavioural pattern which carries overtones of ennui and despair.

Korean by birth, American by formal education, Henry Park is confronted with many dilemmas throughout Lee's *debut* novel. This utterly cultural clash, undoubtedly connoting more than a to and fro movement in a legitimate attempt to fit in, to gain the inner strength to voice one's creed, is envisaged as one powerful driving force of *Native Speaker.*

Even for Lelia, it has proved difficult to change Henry Park's attitudes that have become so deeply entrenched over the years. To name just one such attitude, I would refer to Henry's emotionally aseptic manners which are gradually undermining his marriage. Moreover, along with myriad other issues, the protagonist's inability to unveil his feeling articulates the premise for the couple's life to start shattering.

3. Insights into Native Speaker's Identity Discourse

Chang-rae Lee's protagonist is depicted as a neo-American, with a Korean background. He is also a spy, therefore, many times, a traitor betraying even his own kind: 'We casually spoke of ourselves as business people. Domestic travellers. We went wherever there was a need. The urgency of that need, like much of everything else, was determined by some calculus of power and money. […] In a phrase, we were spies.' (Lee, 2013:18)

As the story unfolds, we find that as a 1.5 Korean American, Henry Park is still grappling with a past, reminiscent of his immigrant condition: 'So call me what you will. An assimilist, a lackey. A duteous foreign-faced boy. I have already been whatever you can say or imagine, every version of the newcomer who is always fearing and bitter and sad.'(*ibid:* 171-2)

Henry Park feels alienated throughout his childhood and adolescence years as he can't understand his father. The two grow even more distant once Henry's mother passes away. Father and son do care for each other, yet they don't bond. They don't make a full display of their feelings. As a matter of fact, there is hardly any real display of human emotion between them: 'My father was obviously not modern, in the psychological sense. He was still mostly unencumbered by those needling questions and self-consciousness. Irony was always lost on him. He was the definition of a thick skin. For most of my youth I wasn't sure that he had the capacity to love.' (*ibid:* 63)

Henry's father manages to be a reliable provider for the family, but he fails to genuinely communicate with his only son: 'How similar it was with me, with my father in our house. Even the most minor speech seemed trying. To tell him I loved him, I studied far into the night. I read my entire children's encyclopedia […] I spit-shined and brushed his shoes every Sunday morning.' (*ibid:* 138)

His father's existence has been driven by a sense of duty and honour: 'I saw a man who didn't have to make a display of himself. You knew he walked every inch to where he is. He owes no one, and he can't conceive of being owned something.' (*ibid:* 131)

Once in America, Henry's father began to toil from dawn to dusk with a sole purpose in mind: to support his family, to grow into an entrepreneur, running his own fruit and vegetable chain of stores, without necessarily indulging a careless lifestyle, but just a decent one and,

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by comparison, a lifestyle akin to the average mainstream American citizen: 'I thought his life was all about money. He drew much energy and pride from his ability to make it almost at will. He was some kind of human annuity. He had no real cleverness or secrets for good business; he simply refused to fail, leaving absolutely nothing to luck or chance or someone else.' (*ibid:* 53)

Henry Park's stream of confessions prevails in the novel. Moreover, what truly catches readers' attention might be his preciseness of details, a keen eye for introspection, as well as the writer's almost compulsive search for metaphors every two pages. It's a first person narrative voice, instilling in readers an increasing curiosity to simply follow the emerging intricate leads: 'The day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was. I didn't know what she was handing me. She had been compiling it without my knowledge for the last year or so we were together.' (*ibid:* 1) If we are to map out his journey in pursuit of a true self, we better flirt with the content of this list, which reverberates throughout the whole novel: 'It said, variously: *You are surreptitious/ B+ student of life/ first thing hummer of Wagner and Strauss/ illegal alien/emotional alien/genre bug/ Yellow peril: neo-American/[…] sentimentalist/anti-romantic/-analyst (you fill in)/ stranger/ follower/ traitor/spy/ False speaker of language.'*(*ibid:* 5-6)

The plot unfolds seemingly at random as the narrative fabric doesn't circumscribe to any particular chronological criterion. For the sake of definite turning points' relevance, depicted as a string of overwhelming facts, Henry Park initiates a thoroughgoing zigzag that criss-crosses his existential quagmires, both past and present. Embarked on such a literary journey, we are to witness Chang-rae Lee's talent for deconstructing and reassessing a sample of the XXth century American urban jungle universe.

Native Speaker has taken readers by surprise since it poses different questions from those brought to the fore by classic immigrant literature. A spy-protagonist, who refuses to be fitted into any ideological straitjacket, may be an example dovetailing with the previous statement: 'I wanted to explain myself, smartly, irrefutably. […] I had always thought that I could be anyone, perhaps several anyones at once. Dennis Hoagland and his private firm had conveniently appeared at the right time, offering the perfect vocation for the person I was, someone who could reside in his one place and take half-steps out whenever he wished. For that I felt indebted to him for life. I found a sanction from our work, for I thought I had finally found my truest place in the culture.' (*ibid:*137)

Furthermore, the author blends dramatic facts with snapshots of serenity and glances at ephemeral happiness, in an attempt to tailor a story worthy of being read and, what's more, to be whole-heartedly enjoyed. Beyond any shade of doubt, he achieves it eventually.

Henry Park's story envisages a strenuous quest for one's genuine self, puzzling out the reconciliation of the past with the present. However, striking a balance between achievements and losses, crumbs of truth and myriad lies, communication and lack thereof, courage and cowardice, happiness and despondency, therefore such endeavour is bound to fuel countless events underlying Henry's inner strength and readiness to confront both his consciousness and the manner life has treated him: '… but for the first time I found myself at moments running short of my story, my chosen narrative. […] I was no longer extrapolating; I was looping it through the core, freely talking about my life, suddenly breaching the confidences of my father and my mother and my wife. I even spoke to him about a lost dead son. I was becoming dangerously frank, inconsistently schizophrenic.' (*ibid:* 24)

I would venture the opinion that Chang-rae Lee poignantly treads among past instances of Henry Park's life, enabling him to head towards a conundrum-like present that is wrapped into more than one identity dilemmas, carrying nonetheless a distinct touch of resolution to design a considerably more balanced future for his wife and him: 'And perhaps most I loved

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this about her, her helpless way, love it still, how she can't hide a single thing, that she looks hurt when she is hurt, seems happy when happy. That I know at every moment the precise place where she stands. What else can move a man like me, who would find nothing as siren or comforting?'(*ibid:*169-170)

The identity discourse is fourfold: to start with, does Henry Park act properly as a Korean or American child? Does he mostly embrace Korean values, thus leading his childhood and adolescence in accordance with them, or does he find them incomprehensible, being seduced, instead, by the more appealing American ones? Along the same lines, I maintain that Henry has been simmering with resentment relative to his father's emotional numbness since his childhood: 'The kind of display my father would not have tolerated in any member of his family. It would have sickened him. *Nobody give two damn about your problem or pain,* he might say. *You just take care yourself. Keep it quiet.* ' (*ibid:* 195)

Secondly, as a professional, even though I would add, quite an incongruous one since he works as an industrial spy, is Henry Park's performance more in line with the embedded Korean or American beliefs? Where exactly lays Henry's faith? Does he come along as a 'trustworthy spy,' although he betrays people which one may consider his own kind? The mendacity seems to permeate not only his professional realm but also his personal relationships: 'The truth, finally, is who can tell it. And yet you may know me. I am an amiable man. I can be most personable, if not charming, and whatever I possess in this life is more or less the result of a talent I have for making you feel good about yourself when you are with me.' (*ibid:* 7)

I can't help myself wondering if Henry Park, entangled in such an intrinsically duplicitous job, is, indeed, siding with either one of the two parts, that is with the American employer who heavily downsizes the impact that Henry Park's work might have on any of the assigned clients, or with these Asian clients who are generally entrusted to the Korean American industrial spy in order to smoothly act on them: 'Typically the subject was a well-to-do immigrant supporting some potential insurgency in his old land, or else funding a fledgling trade union or radical student organization. Sometimes he was simply an agitator. Maybe a writer of conscience. An expatriate artist.' (*ibid:*19)

At the end of the day, though, it all comes down to the extent to which Henry Park manages to trick the vigilance of his consciousness: 'Then we wrote the tract of their lives, remote, unauthorized biographies. I the most prodigal and mundane of historians.' (*ibid:* 20)

An industrial spy, his duties do not imply being physically violent. In this regard, his job is violence-free. Still, it would be too far-fetched to acknowledge that working as an industrial spy doesn't entail any type of violence or doesn't come with any peril warnings attached to it: "'Remember how I taught you. Just stay in the background. Be unapparent and flat. Speak enough so they can hear your voice and come to trust it, but no more, and no one will think twice about who you are. The key is to make them think just once. No more, no less.[…] I just want you to write out a good legend for this and stick with it.' " (*ibid:* 46-7)

Thirdly, when his future wife, Lelia, a Wasp's bold, self-confident daughter, steps into his life, Henry Park's masks start slipping, yet not the most pivotal and enduring ones, since marrying a Scottish, proud English native speaker wouldn't substantiate the impending end of his spy-career. His fortuitous encounter with Lelia marks Henry's life in several other ways: 'But the marriage must be the willingness to walk the blind alleys. Maybe I know that now. You don't tempt fate, you ignore it completely. During the two months she was gone in the Italian islands I walked the streets of the city with my back blind. I was matching the steps of my soloist wife at the other end of the world.' (*ibid:* 15)

As Lelia's husband, Henry Park fails again to commit himself one hundred percent to what they are building together: 'I didn't trust you anymore. That I didn't know how you

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really felt about anything, our marriage. Me. You. I realized one day that I didn't know the first thing about what was going on inside your head. Sometimes I think you're not even here, with the rest of us, you know, engaged, present. I don't know anymore why you do things. What you really want from me.' (*ibid:* 136)

Up until an invisible threshold, Henry Park is seemingly behaving as a regularly reliable husband. Once reaching a particular ceiling, Chang-rae Lee's protagonist is compulsively nurturing his propensity for introversion and detachment. Keeping things to himself and omitting great chunks of his life prove to gradually ruin his relationship with Lelia: 'I don't know what you need in life. For example, do you need your job? […] I mean really thought about what you do up there with your friends. […] I just see it as something *not good*. It's as simple as that. I'm not going to invent things anymore for what you do. You think you can leave in the morning and play camera obscura all day and then come home and get into bed and say you're glad to see me. Well, buster, people aren't like that. […] Maybe it's a condition with you. I just know you have parts to you that I can't touch.' (*ibid:* 136-7)

Their son, Mitt is the only one who really succeeds in bringing them together by cementing their bond even if this happens for only several years. After his tragic death, they turn into 'people who' have lost 'forever the truest moment of their union.' (*ibid:* 115)

Lastly, Chang-rae Lee presents us with his protagonist's fatherhood instances, a blessed period when Henry's withdrawal from their couple's life becomes less conspicuous. He is also projected as a rather confused father about whether or not educating his son the same way he was educated, that is in a quite emotionally aseptic manner: 'Mitt said I love you four times. […] I never felt comfortable with the phrase, had a deep trouble with it, all the ways it was said. You could say it in a celebratory sense. For corroboration. In gratitude. To get a point across, to instill guilt in your lover, to defend yourself. You said it after great deliberation, or when you felt reckless. You said it when you meant it and sometimes when you didn't.' (*ibid:* 122)

In this particular regard, the identity conundrum is prompted by Henry Park's need to heel past traumas so that he can tackle new responsibilities: 'By that last summer Mitt was thick with them all. Friends for life, or so it must have seemed. […] After he died they all seemed to get hidden away somewhere, like sets of precious china […] But for a long time the little arms and legs and voices were part of my nightly ritual before sleep. Like a cinematic mantra, a mystical trailer of memory, I replayed the scene of all those boys standing in the grass about the spontaneous crèche of his death.' (*ibid:* 113)

Native Speaker comes across as an intricate novel, since it is peppered with questions, many without eliciting any response, with fascinating insights into human relationships, hence a novel of appearances and of their dissipation, of the ethnic perspective on the mainstream American society, of human grandeur and decadence, of suspicions, of the ethnic shipwreck within the prevailing white American society, of redemptive errors, of some other errors annihilating identities, of slipping masks, of artificially designed myths, of attempts at identity remapping in order to survive, of perpetual foreigners reluctant to assimilation, a novel with and about immigrants, unravelling linguistic dilemmas and bringing to the fore of the narrative tropes of despondency as well as of recycled hopes.

4. The Idiosyncratic Pronunciation of a Non-native Speaker. Language, the Foremost Identity Marker

It is definitely true that we find irrefutable evidence sustaining Mary Jane Hurst's assertions: '*Native Speaker* is a novel about the use of language in America at the end of the millennium, about the meaning of language, and about the importance of language in

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reflecting individual and community identity. In its title, *Native Speaker,* and in its content, from opening to closing, the book is about the power of language to shape and reveal the inner self.' (Hurst, 2011: 82)

Not being an English native speaker encodes Henry Park's perpetual status of an alien notwithstanding his fluency in the host culture's language. The metaphor of language as *belonging* presents us with integration subtleties in disguise as the novel abounds in corresponding linguistic comments, more or less blunt: 'I will always make bad errors of speech. I remind myself of my mother and father, fumbling in front of strangers. Lelia says there are certain mental pathways of speaking that can never be unlearned. Sometimes I'll still say riddle for little, or bent for vent, though without any accent and so whoever's present just thinks I've momentarily lost my train of thought. But I always hear myself displacing the two languages […]' (Lee, 2013: 249-50)

I consider that language, like a pivotal pawn of the Americanization process, carries one too many shades of meaning, thus emphasizing Lee's aim of making a statement through his title: *Native Speaker.* Unlike Lelia whose first language was English, therefore she is, beyond any suspicion of doubt, entitled to enjoy the native speaker qualifier, Henry Park's English skills have been acquired over years of gruelling efforts to reconcile the embedded linguistic patterns of his mother tongue, Korean, with those of an unbelievably strange language.

Furthermore, one of the ideas I can infer from Chang-rae Lee's gripping novel is that mastering English doesn't necessarily entail a miraculous erasure of all other features, indicative of his ethnicity, meaning of his inability to access the same amount of information as the American mainstream society.

Culturally immersed in the American mainstream society, Henry Park has nonetheless felt singled out by his English performances hardly enough to enable him pass for *a native speaker.* Lelia, for one, an ESL teacher, could not have been fooled by him.

Alongside what I have already pointed out, Korean scholar, HyungjiPark, delves further into the matters concerning the inextricably connected *language* and *assimilation*: "*Native Speaker*: the two words of Chang-rae Lee's title seem, at first glance, to be self-explanatory. We all know what a 'native speaker' is: a fluent speaker of a language, one who has absorbed that speech from birth or early childhood, often from family. The novel offers up a definition, at least, of the antonym: 'non-native speakers' among children are those who entered school 'speaking a home language other than English'. When Korean American, Henry Park first meets his' very white' and 'American' wife-to-be, Lelia Boswell, he confesses that people like him 'are always thinking about still having an accent.'"

Chang-rae Lee, for being an American writer of Korean ancestry and choosing to draw on ethnicity–related matters in several of his novels as well as on his naturalized status, has been readily labelled as 'an ethnic writer', empowered with the authoritative voice of a minority's spokesperson. Notwithstanding the readers' and some critics' assumptions, the writer has always eschewed such responsibility. Along the same lines, literary critic Mary Jane Hurst argues that 'A reader would be foolish to assume that Chang-rae Lee represents the point of view of all Korean Americans or that Amy Tan has been writing documentaries. Just as John Updike does not represent all white men and Alice Walker does not represent all black women, Tan and Lee should not been seen as spokespersons for Americans of Chinese or Korean ancestry.' (Hurst, 2011:80)

5. The Kwang Job. A Genesis of Henry Park's Spy-Career Ending

When meeting Dr. Luzan, a psychoanalyst he has to observe as part of his mission, for some unfathomable reason, the restrained Korean American spy almost blows his cover as the therapeutic sessions prove to address his own issues, not those of a mere imaginary character. More by accident than design, he comes out almost clean, without the last of his

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masks having fallen out: 'This loss of human connection and redemption through confession matches that loss of communication […] In this case, the promise offered by the humanism of psychoanalysis is perverted by Henry's obligation to work as a spy; deception and mendacity take precedence over his efforts to achieve self-discovery. Contrasting sharply with Dr. Luzan's psychology of hope, then, is the spy's realization that telling the truth endangers one; it joins the other examples of disillusionment and frustration when one tries to find the truth of knowledge and authenticity in an arbitrary world.'(Caton, 2008: 123-4)

After tackling the mission of Dr. Luzan in a rather haphazard manner, his chameleon manners lie dormant until Dennis Hoagland decides to assign him John Kwang, the Korean American mayoral aspirant: 'John Kwang was Korean, slightly younger than my father would have been, though he spoke a beautiful, almost formal English. He had a JD- MBA from Fordham. He was a self-made millionaire. The pundits spoke of his integrity, his intelligence. His party was pressuring him for the mayoral race. He looked impressive on television. Handsome, irreproachable. Silver around the edges. A little unbeatable.' (Lee, 2013:25)

With a view to dwelling on Henry's 'primary assignment', Mary Jane Hurst emphasizes John Kwang's skills at 'bringing a new paradigm to city issue' coupled with his contribution of 'innovative ideas to other' matters, features which definitely help Lee's protagonist understand his new target's value: 'Henry's primary assignment in the novel requires him to gather information about John Kwang, a Korean American city councilman considering a run for mayor of New York. Henry does not know who requests the information or even what information is wanted. His job is to infiltrate the personal and public life of Kwang. Kwang, a handsome man with a traditional Korean wife and two young sons, is a self-made millionaire who is active in his church, in the Korean American community, and in the New York political scene.' (Hurst, 2011: 85)

Additionally, we see how getting close to John Kwang, the aspiring Korean American mayoral candidate, is not tantamount to what the ethnic spy has already envisioned: 'Kwang was certainly arresting to me.[…] Before I knew of him, I had never even conceived of someone like him. A Korean man, of his age, as part of the vernacular. Not just a respectable grocer or dry cleaner or doctor, but a larger public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family.'(Lee, 2013:149)

John Kwang's public persona is surprisingly at odds with the manner in which Henry has been accustomed to think about any possible trajectory of Koreans in America: '[…]A heterogeneous, hybrid and multiplicitous Asian America necessarily includes those who have apparently made it, like, for example, Chang-rae Lee's John Kwang, and those who struggle with traumatic pasts as they continue into the present and are exacerbated by intraracial and interracial differences.' (Adams, 2008: 172) Consequently, when he observes Kwang's taking centre stage, all the ingrained beliefs seemingly turn obsolete: 'He displayed an ambition I didn't recognize, or more, one I hadn't yet envisioned as something a Korean man would find significant or worthy of energy and devotion; he didn't seem afraid like my mother and father, who were always wary of those who would try to shame us or mistreat us.' (Lee, 2013: 149)

As Bella Adams argues, "'for the most part, however, *Native Speaker* is not concerned with this wartime history, but with post-war historical events. At least three contemporary events are represented in the novel: first, the 1992 uprising in Los Angeles; second, the 1993 *Golden Venture* incident in New York when a ship carrying illegal Chinese immigrants ran aground; and, third, 'Giuliani time' " (Adams, 2008: 167)

Approaching John Kwang's public figure, Bella Adams poignantly underscores the apparent discrepancies between the mayoral candidate and the professional spy, both

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American citizens of Korean ancestry: "Not an exploiter, then, like Park and his colleagues, Kwang is champion and friend of the exploited, from unregistered voters to undocumented workers and 'every boat person in between'. Kwang's constituency resembles a multicultural family, and his campaign attempts to diversify Asian American political practices. Kwang's response to the injustice perpetuated by the white patriarchal political economy is a 'giant money club, our huge *ggeh* for all…with people other than just our own' giving and receiving financial support." (*ibid*: 169)

By the same token, the Korean *ggeh* is also taken into consideration by Mary Jane Hurst: 'Huge sums are being donated, mostly in small amounts by vast numbers of legitimate shopkeepers and poorer workers, many of them illegal aliens, in Kwang's district. In turn, Kwang distributes money to those starting their own businesses or those with special needs. The system operates with honourable intent, modelled after the Korean *ggeh*.' (Hurst, 2011: 90)

In John Kwang's case, Henry Park's is a mission accomplished. He makes headway in handling the trappings of the espionage writing by gathering enough evidence to substantiate the allegations against the mayoral candidate. Nonetheless, all the energy which has permeated his existence while working as a spy, is eventually sublimated into his irrevocable decision of ceasing to be one.

6. Conclusion

Native Speaker unravels a string of past occurrences alongside present events, its protagonist being deeply engulfed in memories as he attempts to disentangle truth from lies. In a similar vein, Chang-rae Lee's novel acquaints readers with a solid, intriguing story which skilfully intersperses confessions with harrowing facts.

A magnificently written literary work which dismisses immigrant stereotypes, putting on display an embedded unpredictability and distorted chronology, therefore a novel sprinkled with hints of reconciling older selves with new ones, thus denouncing unbearable instances of life as well as inquisitively peeking inside one's inner turmoil. I would underscore that all the aforementioned facts ultimately converge toward switching impressive angles within a well-articulated intrigue.

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