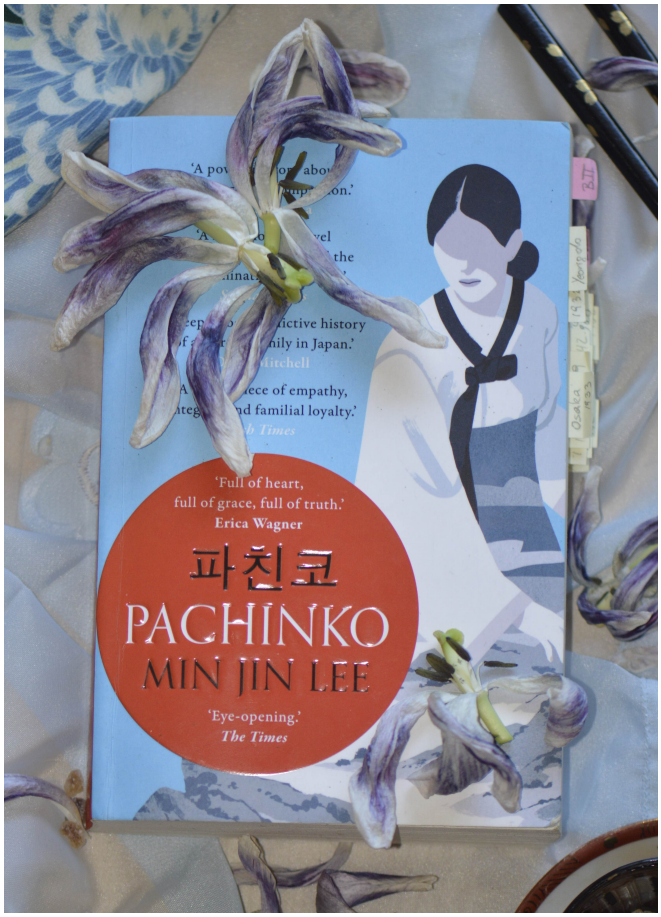
REVIEW

Overlooked: Being Korean in Japan — A Review of "Pachinko" by Min Jin Lee

by Chiara Meitz



'Pachinko' by Min Jin Lee © Corina Meitz

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***Pachinko* (2017) by Min Jin Lee leads us into the lives of a Korean family in Japan during the 20th century. Her narrative follows four generations through hope, loss, and the slithering prejudice that filled the smallest crevices of everyday life for Koreans in Japan. It is a story of exile and homelessness in a hostile country, their lives divided between a Japan that treats them as second class residents and a Korea that doesn't recognize them anymore. Throughout the novel, Lee also shows us moments of feminist empowerment and the resilience that allows families, and women in particular, to survive and push through despite everything that life throws at them.**

“History had failed us, but no matter.”

This is the beginning of the novel *Pachinko*, written by Korean-born writer Min Jin Lee. It is a perfect first sentence for a novel dealing with the experiences of Korean émigrés in Japan in the twentieth century. In her work, Lee addresses a variety of topics — from seduction and love, over death and grief, to isolation and identity as well as religion. Her characters are complex and intriguing, giving life to experiences of Korean history which are rarely addressed.

‘Pachinko’ by Min Jin Lee © Corina Meitz

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Pachinko follows one Korean family starting in the earlier 1900s when Sunja, a fisherman's daughter, falls pregnant, threatening her family’s name and honour as the child’s father is unable to marry her. However, a young minister, whom Sunja and her mother nursed during an illness, offers to wed her and take her to Japan, allowing her to avoid the shame. This sets off their family’s life in Japan, a country brutally oppressive to their fellow Koreans, where they are regarded as unequal and lesser inhabitants.

Lee herself was born in Seoul, South Korea, and emigrated to New York as a child. *Pachinko* is her second novel, in which she covers a period of over fifty years, focusing on one Korean family’s experience and spanning four generations. While there are always streaks of hope, the book also casts light onto the painful moments in life, not shying away from topics such as death, suicide, and grief. For me, it was definitely not a light read.

Home and Homelessness

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> In Seoul, people like me get called Japanese bastards, and in Japan, I'm just another dirty Korean no matter how much money I make or how nice I am.

Identity is a topic pervading the lives of all characters. As the majority of them is Korean, they all struggle with the way they are perceived by the Japanese population — as dirty, criminal, dumb, and untrustworthy. Lee portrays a time in history when Japanese and Koreans are not supposed to mingle. What blood you carry within you determines the way your life will go. Therefore, because they are Korean, Japan cannot truly become a home for Sunja's offspring despite them having been born, grown up, and spent their entire lives there. At the same time, while the wish is oftentimes voiced, they cannot return to Korea either, a country lying in shambles after the war. As Mozasu stresses in the quote above, they belong neither to Korea nor to Japan, but they are regarded as foreigners in both as they are culturally associated with the other one respectively. What seems to matter is where you come from, not the person you are. Lee stresses it again and again in her work that as a Korean in Japan you could not make yourself into the person you wanted to be. It haunts Mozasu and Noa, Sunja's boys, their whole lives, affecting even the following generation.

While the topic is addressed time and again, there is one particular event that was especially striking to me. On his fourteenth birthday, Solomon, Mozasu's son, has to get his first registration card so he would not be deported since "Koreans born in Japan after 1952 had to report to their local ward office on their fourteenth birthday to request permission to stay in Japan." This procedure needs to be repeated every three years. This perfectly illustrates how Koreans had no motherland in Japan, even if they had been living there for generations. Mozasu explains to his girlfriend that "the clerk was not wrong. And this is something Solomon must understand. We can be deported. We have no motherland. Life is full of things he cannot control so he must adapt. My boy has to survive." The policy of registration is only one example which demonstrates the different treatment Japanese and Korean inhabitants received. However, it is not a fact simply thrown at the reader's face, but it comes alive in the novel in the characters, their emotions, relationships, and stories. Mozasu appears to have accepted having no place of belonging. His focus has become his family and providing as good a life as he can.

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Min Jin Lee visit for Princeton Migrations © Princeton Public Library

Female Emancipation in a Patriarchal Society

When reading, it struck me from the beginning that the novel has a strong focus on female experience. For a great part of the book, the reader follows Sunja and her sister-in-law Kyunghee as they try to make ends meet and support their husbands. The happenings in their lives correspond to what Sunja is told at the beginning of the novel:

> Sunja-ya, a woman's life is endless work and suffering. There is suffering and then more suffering. It's better to expect it, you know. You're becoming a woman now, so you should be told this. For a woman, the man you marry will determine the quality of your life completely. A good man is a decent life, and a bad man is a cursed life — but no matter what, always expect suffering, and just keep working hard. No one will take care of a poor woman — just ourselves.

The family's life is never easy, especially when it is touched by death and illness. Sunja and Kyunghee strive to be good wives to their husbands — obedient and submissive, supporting them constantly and with all they have. However, the narrative also presents a feminist touch. Sunja especially is not shy when it comes to taking matters into her own hands as the need arises: she sells a present from her former lover to gain money to pay off debts, which upsets her brother-in-law as he views it as humiliating to have his debts paid by a woman, but this action ensures their survival. Likewise, she decides to sell kimchi and candy at the market to have some income to support their family. These emancipatory actions might go unnoticed if it were not for the strong patriarchal stance her brother-in-law takes. He carries an attitude I would call 'toxic masculinity': "In their marriage, [Kyunghee's husband] had

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denied her nothing except for the ability to earn money. He believed that a hardworking man should be able to take care of his family by himself, and that a woman should remain at home." It is his resistance and wish to undermine his wife's and sister-in-law's agency which highlights their emancipation. Sunja and Kyunghee do not want to oppose him, but they do out of necessity. Lee thereby manages to convey the picture of two average women with the courage of lionesses when it comes to their family. Sunja's and Kyunghee's self-sacrifice is a greatly emancipatory and feminist move, giving back agency to women in a society and a family infused with patriarchal structures and beliefs.

The Good and the Bad

Pachinko is not the lightest read but it is a delight to read it. Min Jin Lee manages to present her readers with history infused with life, throwing light on a period in Korea as well as in Japan which I as a European knew nothing about before reading this book. The individuality of each character and their different struggles, which are intertwined and oftentimes stem from the same causes, is mesmerising and gripping. The novel gave me joy and at the same time it crushed me. It is deeply depressing as well as hopeful, presenting life as it is — with all the good and all the bad and everything in between.

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