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“Mirrored Images: Love and Loathing in Korean American Fiction”

In her seminal work, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, Elaine H. Kim argues, “The function of stereotypes of Asians in Anglo-American literature has been to provide literary rituals through which myths of white racial supremacy might be continually reaffirmed.” Kim offers as one example Achmed Abdullah’s “The Honorable Gentleman” (1919), in which the Harvard-educated Chinese kills his blind white wife, fearing her eyesight might be restored and that she will leave him when she sees his “repulsive Mongol devil mask of a Chinese face.” For Korean American writers, from Younghill Kang, the father of Korean American literature, to Chang-rae Lee, the legacy of such literary rituals is the treacherous ground upon which their own fiction and fictional characters must struggle to situate themselves. Korean American writers, as much as other minority group writers, are engaged in a Girardian deconstruction, or unveiling, of the myths that obfuscate the actual and literary violence inflicted upon their people. This paper begins with an examination of the history of the images mirrored upon Korean Americans and charts the attempts by Korean American writers to reject these images even as they struggle to find alternative images, struggling precisely because they experience the impossibility of “self-construction” unmediated by the images of the dominant culture.