Mother-Daughter Relationships in Two Korean American Immigrant Novels:

Kim Ronyoung's *Clay Walls* and An Na's *A Step from Heaven*

By

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Abstract

Kim Ronyoung’s novel *Clay Walls* and An Na’s novel *A Step from Heaven* both depict Korean families undergoing the trials of an American immigrant experience. Through a close textual analysis, I identify a shifting of traditional family roles, especially for the husband and wife, that paves the way for the mother-daughter relationship to become the core of the family and the center of the novels. Of particular note is both authors’ use of female adolescent narrators, who describe their families’ difficult experiences and articulate their own identity-related struggles. As each daughter navigates her complex identity as a Korean American adolescent, her relationship with her mother becomes the most important influence in her life. The exchange of the mother-daughter relationship in both novels is ultimately mutual: The mothers are able to reconcile their conflicted identities as immigrant women through these daughters who have grown to value their mothers’ cultural identities and embrace their mothers’ legacies of strength.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Kim Ronyoung’s *Clay Walls* (1986) is a novel split into three sections: Part One is narrated in the third person through the perspective of wife and mother Haesu, Part Two is similarly narrated through husband and father Chun, and Part Three is narrated in the first person by their only daughter, Faye. Chun’s section is the briefest, but it foreshadows his eventual self-destruction and abandonment of the family. Mother and daughter remain, their sections book-ending the novel, and their experiences are able to inform each other’s precarious identities as Korean American women. Faye is inherently knitted to her mother, and she must learn what her mother has been living for all these years in order to define her own identity. At the cusp of adulthood, Faye has the opportunity to be a self-aware young woman who embraces her dual identity, and we see this shaping through her narration. Through Faye’s promising future, Faye’s mother Haesu is able to reconcile herself with the painful dismemberment she experienced by being cut off from her beloved motherland so many years ago.

An Na’s short novel *A Step from Heaven* (2001) has only one narrator, Young Ju Park, who articulates the most vivid memories of her life from age four to approximately age 18. She recalls her family’s preparation for immigration to America, the birth of her younger brother, and her father’s abuse and its effects on the family. Young Ju’s earliest memory, swimming in the ocean with her father, haunts the novel. Throughout her childhood, Young Ju yearns for her father’s recognition, which seems to be essential to her identity formation. Ultimately though, Young Ju’s mother—a subtle, hard-working, beaten, and nearly silent figure—emerges unexpectedly as the most important figure in
Young Ju’s life. Their mother-daughter relationship is undoubtedly the core of this battered family’s story.

In my thesis, a close textual analysis of *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven*, I will focus on these 1.5/second-generation\(^1\) female adolescents and their relationships with their mothers in order to illuminate the difficulties of their families’ immigration and survival in a new country. This discussion will identify them as being in a unique position to articulate the experience, as their parents and male siblings cannot. While mother-daughter relationships in Asian American immigrant literature have largely been discussed—specifically in such Chinese American texts as Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*—this relationship in the context of a Korean American family begs its own distinct discussion. Because the mothers often take on many of the fathers’ roles after immigration in Korean American culture—as seen in social history and in literature—the mother-daughter relationship becomes the new core of the family, in place of the patriarchal center of the father-son relationship. Invaluable to my study is research on the Korean American immigrant family, including historical overviews, case studies, and interviews, as a body of work that illuminates the significant reshaping of the traditional nuclear Korean family that occurs upon immigration. In a broader context, the scholarship on immigrant literature serves as a valuable shell for identifying and discussing the identity and relationship struggles common to the immigrant experience, regardless of ethnicity.

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\(^1\) I refer to *A Step from Heaven*’s Young Ju as of the 1.5 generation because she emigrated at age four, and the term is loosely defined as referring to people who are born in another home country but move to America permanently before adulthood. As a child born in America to parents who emigrated during their adulthood, I refer to *Clay Walls*’ Faye as of the second generation.
In selecting the primary texts for a project that aims to speak to the Korean American immigrant experience, I gravitated toward works by female writers who chose strong female voices as their means of storytelling. Rather than isolating one work, I felt a selection of two works would reveal certain commonalities. *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven* allow me to specifically focus on narration through a female perspective as a powerful mode of communication for the experiences of a Korean American immigrant family. *Clay Walls* is widely considered a foundation work for the body of Korean American literature as it stands today, and author Kim Ronyoung’s concern was to depict the first generation of Korean immigrants in mainland America during the early 20th century, doing so through straightforward prose style. Moving forward to a contemporary work, one that is considered young adult fiction, *A Step from Heaven* offers a more experimental style through vignette-like narrative chapters. Despite their separation across time and stark difference in style, the novels’ young narrators can meet on common ground, their narratives speaking to each other as they shape their identities and share stories that point instinctively to the influence of subtle but powerful mothers.

Another Korean American novel, Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*, indeed engages with the significance of the mother-daughter relationship, doing so through female narrative voices. The atrocities of Japanese occupation haunt the novel, and it is a moving work as an isolated text and within the context of the Korean American immigrant experience. However, I am choosing to focus on *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven* because they showcase traditional Korean family units. The way these nuclear families transform is important because it allows for the surprising emergence of the
strong mother and the mother-daughter relationship that will carry on the family’s legacy. Though *Clay Walls* is often seen as historical fiction and *A Step from Heaven* is classified as reading for young adults, I feel they can speak louder than their categories and, particularly, speak for a universal immigrant experience. No study has undertaken an in-depth analysis of the mother-daughter relationship within each novel alone, and no study has linked these two works together. In fact, *A Step from Heaven* is so recent it has gone virtually unconsidered by scholars.

The mother-daughter relationships in *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven* are mutually beneficial, depicting a reciprocity between mother and daughter. The narration of the female adolescents reveals their roles as young women who are successfully navigating their difficult Korean American identities. Through the independence, strength, and articulation of these daughters, then, the first-generation immigrant mothers in the novels are able to reconcile their own conflicted identities. The significance of the mother-daughter relationship gives the daughter the unique opportunity to essentially perpetuate her mother’s existence as a strong woman through her own finding of identity, without losing the motherland part of herself to the dominant American culture. While these daughters cannot ignore the dual consciousness that distinguishes them from their Korean-minded mothers, the mothers’ strength and tenacity ensure that their daughters find inherent value in the Korean-ness of their hybrid identities rather than associating traditional Korean culture with what is negative, strange, or “other” amid their American-lived lives. Though Young Ju wants to be accepted by her American schoolmates and
Faye yearns for the independence that being American-born seems to endow, they do not find true reflections of themselves, their needs, and their hopes by looking outward.

Kim Ronyoung and An Na create a space within their novels for female narrators to talk through the difficulties of being young Korean American women. Faye and Young Ju essentially narrate themselves into existence, defining their identities in the context of their individual experiences. However, they cannot do so in isolation, not without recognizing the Korean culture of their heritage, the American influence of the world at large, and the strength of the mothers who ensured their physical survival. Instinctively, they find their mothers have given them much more; indeed, the strength of their narrative voices is nothing if not shaped by their mothers’ silent strength. For the mothers, the separation from Korea is perhaps too painful to ever fully recover from. But the daughters have the opportunity to live lives of purpose and contentment despite their difficult dual identities, and this ultimately validates the mothers’ sacrifices.

The following chapter of my thesis, the Review of the Literature, will discuss the bodies of existing scholarship on immigrant literature, Asian American literature, and the Korean American experience within social history as they pertain to immigrant identity struggles and the mother-daughter relationship. My third chapter will focus on the struggles and shifting of traditional patriarchal roles that occur within the Korean immigrant families in *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven*, establishing the environment out of which the mother-daughter relationship grows and the necessity for this relationship. With fathers who self-destroekt and disappear and sons left perpetually unhinged for lack of strong male figures, the mothers of these texts become the
foundation of the family. My fourth chapter will focus on Faye and Young Ju as they come to accept and resolve their Korean American identities through the articulation of their narration, which showcases the importance of the mother-daughter relationship. These relationships, troublesome though they may be at times, are the novels’ most hopeful factors and emerge as a solution to the crises of identity these Korean American women face.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

We cannot study the field of immigrant literature without recognizing concerns of identity within the characters of fictional and biographical pieces alike. Similarly, writers of ethnic minorities often engage with the struggle to define who they are and where they fit into society through their writing, if only choosing—through their characters or for themselves—to remain on the outside. These figures may be referenced within scholarship as marginalized, outsider, or other, among a myriad of other terms. When the issues of being of an ethnic minority converge with the issues of being a first- or second-generation immigrant, as occurs for the families within Kim Ronyoung’s *Clay Walls* and An Na’s *A Step from Heaven*, the identity crisis becomes even more difficult. Within scholarship, such characters may be referred to as people with hyphenated identities or a double or dual consciousness. These terms emphasize the nature of the identity conflict, one in which difficult binary oppositions exist within individuals—or are thrust open them—as they struggle to define themselves. From forces outside of the home and within the family, people such as the Korean American immigrants in these two novels essentially carry upon their shoulders the burden of duality. During the early years of their immigrant lives, especially for the parents, the identity crisis may go unrecognized, sacrificed to the greater concern of economic survival, through which the wife and mother figure emerges as an indispensable source of strength. The fathers, on their part, often fade into the background, self-destruct, or disappear altogether. To the adolescents, then, and especially the next generation’s females, ultimately falls the issue of being of two worlds.
In his book of essays titled *Imaginary Homelands*, author Salman Rushdie defines the unique position of the immigrant. He states that they are

radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. (124-25)

Indeed, these complex issues of identity cannot be ignored in the scholarship on immigrant literature. Though *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven* as solitary works do not command their own large bodies of scholarship, the broader veins of immigrant literature and Asian American literature—along with sociological research and historical information on the Korean American immigrant family—contextualize the significance of these two works in their depictions of immigrant identity issues. The scholars in these fields consistently find that the most significant issue affecting the communal experience of an immigrant family and the individual experiences of its members is the struggle with identity. This chapter will explore the scholars’ discussions that both allude to and specify the immigrant identity crisis as a major concern.

Immigrant literature scholars point to the issue of a conflicted identity as a major, consistent theme of both biographical and fictional works within the genre. Scholars identify the traditional culture brought from the homeland as an important means by which adult immigrants attempt to maintain their identities amidst poverty and
discrimination. In his article “The Immigrant Novel as Genre,” scholar William Q. Boelhower identifies the progression of events that is characteristic in immigrant novels and includes this adherence to cultural traditions. He defines the narrative structure of the immigrant novel, which requires a portrayal of one or more immigrant protagonists with certain expectations of America who undergo key struggles that, as a result, cause them to reevaluate their views of America to reflect the reality they have experienced. He notes that the protagonists’ expectations of America are initially idealized; however, as they encounter the reality of a harsh life in America, they turn to idealizing their home countries: “Ultimately, this leads the protagonist to idealize the OW [Old World]—either through an attempt to preserve his OW culture, even though he may be assimilated into the NW [New World], or through stiff criticism of an alienating set of experiences in America” (5). The characters cannot help but view America through their Old World identities, resulting in certain stock actions that occur in immigrant novels. As Boelhower discusses, categories of actions that reflect adherence to Old World values include “folklore (folkloric figures, practices, wisdom, and superstition); religion (belief and ritual—scenes of birth, marriage, death); immigrant gatherings and feasts (food and drink, song, dance, music); speech (foreign language dialogue, lexemes, jokes, puns, etc.); memory (the presence of OW [Old World] cultural objects, OW recollections); [and] customs” (7). According to Boelhower, these are the markers of identity most defining to the immigrant experience within literature.

Scholars find that immigrant children as depicted in literature feel unique pressures as they struggle to define their identities in the context of their parents’
traditional cultures and the dominant American culture. Marolina Salvatori, in the article “Women’s Work in Novels of Immigrant Life,” identifies the immigrant novel *Bread Givers* as depicting a father and daughter at odds with one another because of the cultural and generational gap: “*Bread Givers*, by Anzia Yezierska, is a novel about a crucial aspect of immigration: the struggle between fathers of the Old World (in this case a rabbi), and daughters of the new” (47). In her article “In Limbo: Immigrant Children and the American Dream,” Evelyn Gross Avery similarly notes that such struggles manifest themselves in certain ways, including “Generational conflict, cultural clashes, and family strife” (25). She analyzes the opposing forces of traditional values from the homeland and American culture that converge in the adolescent children of immigrant families, adding that they are “doubly burdened by their age and foreign backgrounds” (25). Avery identifies different experiences for these young adults that can be drawn along the lines of gender. Although the female protagonists of Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim* and Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* are better able to embrace opportunities for independence and self-definition of identity, Avery says, neither female nor male characters are able to entirely escape pressing identity issues, their ‘double burdens.’ Avery notes that Octavia and Sara, of the two aforementioned novels, embrace both traditional and American cultures on their own terms in the formation of their personal identities: “Octavia and Sara inhabit two worlds—the immigrant which still dominates their emotional landscape and the American which fuels their ambitions. Both the past and the present, Europe and America, compete for the loyalties of the heroines who attempt to integrate the two” (27). These young women neither reject the traditional
culture of their upbringing nor fully assimilate, obtaining what may be considered the promise of a successful adulthood as immigrant Americans through the striking of that difficult balance.

A significant shift in the immigrant family unit that affects the identities of each member, as literary scholars discuss, is the emergence of first-generation wives and mothers as the primary sources of strength, assuring their families’ survival during times of oppressing poverty. In *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, Puzo observes that “it was always the men who crumbled under the glories of the new land, never the women” (qtd. in Avery 26). Salvatori explores the roles of immigrants wives and mothers, asserting that these women are often overshadowed by their male counterparts in immigrant literature but undeniably essential to the family’s survival. Salvatori identifies *Bread Givers* as using the narrative perspective of the young, independent-minded Sara to ensure the recognition of women’s domestic work as key to men’s survival. Not only is the real toil of women’s work in the immigrant family portrayed in this novel, Salvatori points to *Bread Givers* as showing the disparity between a man’s view of women’s work and the actual nature of this backbreaking work: “[Yezierska] explores the unrewarding and stultifying nature of housework and reveals the extent to which a man is dependent on a wife to save money, to live, to hold on to a job, even if he paradoxically tends to devalue this important function of women” (47). Even if she is not given as much recognition as a man or validated by the novel’s male characters, the wife and mother figure in immigrant literature, as Salvatori notes, takes on a new, essential identity and is constantly in the background, invaluable as she keeps the domestic world of the home
running. Indeed, within *Bread Givers*, the women even provide the primary source of income for the family by working outside the home.

In her book *Images of Asian American Women by Asian American Women Writers*, Esther Mikyung Ghymn analyzes the depictions of first-generation immigrant wives and mothers in biographical and fictional works of Asian American literature, finding them to be examples of feminine strength during difficult times. Helen M. Bannan’s article “Warrior Women: Immigrant Mothers in the Works of their Daughters” identifies the amazing strength required of and shown by first-generation immigrant women: “To overcome the traumas of transplanting, to continue to grow with roots yanked out of native soil and struggling to find sustenance in the hard ground of a different nation, required much fighting spirit” (165). Bannan discusses both depictions of a strong mother and the immigrant daughter’s identity crisis, finding the daughter as struggling with the opposing forces of identification with her mother and rebellion from the Old World values her mother represents. However, Bannan notes that these daughters, in fictional and biographical works, have an awareness of the sacrifices their mothers make, which are often the only things that keep the struggling immigrant family alive. In this way, whether a feature of the actual relationship with their daughters or not, the mothers become a beacon of strength and survival: “The bulk of testimony in the writings of immigrant daughters shows that few really needed reminders of their mothers’ strength in adversity” (Bannan 166). Indeed, literary scholars find that the strong wife and mother figure is a component of the unique communal identity of an immigrant family, as well as a significant influence on the daughter’s personal identity formation.
A discussion of social history concerning early Korean American immigrant experience informs us that the strong wife and mother figure as depicted in immigrant literature is a historic reality. Eun Sik Yang, in her article “Korean Women of America: From Subordination to Partnership, 1903-1930,” notes wives and mothers as essential to laying the foundation for this particular immigrant community’s survival and success in the new homeland. Yang describes them as invaluable within the domestic sphere of the family and within family businesses: “The women of this period contributed in no small measure to the family enterprises” (9). Yang discusses their roles as valuable fixtures in a variety of small family businesses, including grocery stores, laundries, and restaurants. Yang continues to describe these women, who move to filling roles outside the home: “After the family businesses stabilized, the young wives found time to involve themselves in church activities, women’s organizations, and the Korean independence movement” (10). These Korean immigrant women indeed helped to provide economically for their families, but Yang considers the maintenance of Korean cultural identity within the home and the extended Korean American community to be their most important contributions. While early Korean immigrant women were forced, out of necessity, to do equal work with men outside the home, Yang concludes, they were consequently endowed more equal roles within the home, which was the essential foundation for the valuation of Korean women in their communities at large. Speaking to their displays of strength within the family and beyond, Yang states, “Their indomitable will to survive, stamina, and moral courage have become legendary in the history of the pioneering Korean immigrant community” (26).
Literary and sociological scholars alike find that traditional roles within the Korean family are altered dramatically upon immigration, resulting in conflict and strained relationships among family members. In his book *Korean Immigrants and the Challenge of Adjustment*, Moon H. Jo analyzes these difficulties, finding troublesome identity crises within the family. Jo states, “[T]he typical Korean family is often hiding terrible tensions and conflicts resulting from each member of the family trying to accommodate such things as a wife working outside the home” (100). Scholars discuss the traditional Korean value system, in which Confucianism is entrenched, as the most significant factor in the family unit, one that defines roles of submission for a woman, first as a daughter and then as a wife and daughter-in-law. Insook Han Park and Lee-Jay Cho, in their article “Confucianism and the Korean Family,” explain these gender roles as a result of the ingrained Confucian values at work in a modern, though still stratified, Korea: “These values can be observed in Korean hierarchical social relations, such as those between ruler and subject, parent and child, and husband and wife” (118). Though Korea as a nation is rapidly changing via industrialization and urbanization, Park and Cho identify the status of women as one aspect of the Confucian system that has largely gone unchanged. Therefore, as Jo discusses, conflict arises when wives must adapt in America to ensure their families’ survival—often through seeking employment outside the home—but husbands hold the same traditional expectations they had in Korea. Jo notes that the husband may feel threatened by his wife as she gains economic power in the new country and often takes over household and business financial matters. The only identity the husband has ever known is shaken, and he “may come to believe his very role as head
of the household has been undermined” (Jo 100). Jo finds that wives, for their part, may come to expect more consideration, appreciation, and freedom as they contribute in valuable ways to the family’s success and are influenced by American values, specifically those regarding gender roles. Jo explains a common, often undisclosed consequence of these changing identities in Korean families: “The result of the strain is frequently manifested first in verbal abuse, escalating to threats and insults, then physical abuse, or other types of destructive behavior, such as alcoholism, especially by the husbands. Such behavior is rarely reported outside Korean immigrant enclaves, however” (101). As these scholars discuss, a major shift of the wife’s role within the family, along with the other struggles of eking out an existence as an immigrant family, no doubt affects not only the wife’s own identity but also that of the husband.

Accounting for the place of children in the Korean immigrant family makes for a new set of identity-related complications, according to scholars. Jo discusses Korean immigrant parents, and fathers in particular, as desiring to see the success for their children in America that they were unable to have. As a result, Jo states, parents impose high educational expectations on their children. One adult child of first-generation Korean immigrants describes the parental pressure this way: “Growing up, you know the air you breathe in your house is not free. . . . Their blood, sweat, and tears fund the success of the next generation” (qtd. in Jo 108). As the children feel this pressure and are shaped by the American culture around them, scholars note, they see their parents as being overly strict, and a lack of closeness develops, deepening the parent-child conflict. Even the language barrier can become a source of conflict that batters the Korean
American family, as Jo points out. Because children often speak English more fluently than their parents, before their parents, or in place of their parents, identities are shaken and relationships further strained within the family.

Looking at the nature of the complex parent-children relationship within a Korean immigrant family through personal interviews, Karen Pyke concludes, in her article “‘The Normal American Family’ as an Interpretive Structure of Family Life among Grown Children of Korean and Vietnamese Immigrants,” that children of immigrant parents use their perceptions of the typical American “Family” as a major point of comparison to negatively or positively evaluate their own families and, by extension, to shape their own identities. She finds that the construct of the supposedly “normal” family infiltrates the psyches of these immigrant children through television, which rarely depicts families of ethnic minorities, and contact with the families of non-Asian friends. Pyke’s findings show that children look at the open-mindedness of such parents and the emotional connectedness of the “Family” as being in stark contrast to the comparably strict, cold, unaffectionate environments they find within their own homes, assuming their families represent the atypical and the negative type of family structure. Pyke discusses this as a troublesome comparison based on a pervasive, artificial construct of what the “normal” American family is like, one that undoubtedly affects a young person’s personal identity formation: “Such images serve as instruments of control, prescribing how families ought to look and behave” (241). Nonetheless, these “images” put further strain on the parent-child relationship in a Korean American family. One Korean American woman, typical of many responses in Pyke’s study, “disparaged her
parents for not talking more openly, which she attributed to their being Asian” (246). This woman goes on to explain of her family, “[Y]ou don’t have conversations. You just are told to do something and you do it. . . . You never talk about problems, even in the home. You just kind of forget about it and you kind of go on like nothing happened. Problems never really get solved. . . . I have so many different things to say and I’m just not allowed” (qtd. in Pyke 246). Pyke’s study points to the external forces that batter the unity of the Korean American immigrant family and hamper a young Korean American’s personal identity formation.

Scholars of Korean American literature echo these findings concerning the complicated identity of the Korean American adolescent. In the article “Unwrapping the Pojagi: Traditional Values and Changing Times in a Survey of Korean-American Juvenile Literature,” Belinda Y. Louie references aforementioned sociological scholars Jo, Park, and Cho to show that even works of juvenile fiction, though tending toward more hopeful endings, do not ignore the reality of a troubled family life for Korean American immigrants. Focusing on the dilemma specifically presented to immigrant children, Louie states,

Korean-American young people . . . are caught between two cultures. Their home culture is very Korean oriented, from language to food to values, contrasting sharply with the mainstream culture at school. Many Korean immigrants endure their hard work by taking pride in their children’s academic and career successes. . . . [S]uch wishes frequently conflict with some children’s desires. The expectation of going to
prestigious universities and entering professional occupations causes much stress and resentment in Korean young people. (179-80)

Scholar Jane Phillips, in her article “‘We’d Be Rich in Korea’: Value and Contingency in Clay Walls by Ronyoung Kim,” makes note of another unique complication for the children of first-generation Korean immigrants in Clay Walls. She states that mother Haesu’s yangban, or upper-class, social status essentially dictates the lives of the children as descendants of that class. The essential conflict in their lives, Phillips asserts, is the “confrontation between Korean aristocratic and American contingencies” (182). Phillips finds a specific burden put upon only daughter Faye, in whom all the conflicts present in the novel collide.

Scholars of Korean American literature who discuss father figures find that these men are often unable to handle the problems they encounter as members of an immigrant family, especially when their wives exercise more influence in the family. Louie addresses the changing familial roles in works of Korean American literature, noting narrator Young Ju’s father of A Step from Heaven as an example of a husband and father who refuses to accept change: “Being disillusioned with his new life in the United States, he becomes an alcoholic. The pride in him forbids him to accept that his wife has to work to support the family. Alcoholism leads to domestic violence, drunken driving, arrest, and finally abandonment of the family. The Confucian ideal and reality clash” (185). Young Ju’s father simply cannot bear the assault on his identity that immigration to America causes, especially when his wife essentially supplants him as head of the family. For him, it is an impossible transition. Similarly, scholars note that father and husband Chun of
Kim Ronyoung’s *Clay Walls* is unable to function within his own family, primarily due to his wife’s superior class status. His wife Haesu is a proud *yangban* woman, which literary scholars consistently see as contributing to the fractured marriage between Chun and Haesu as well as the emasculating identity crisis Chun experiences. In the article “Class and Self-Identity in *Clay Walls*,” Duckhee Shin explains the nature of this social class and its power to dictate Chun’s position within the family: “The *Yangban* class deemed themselves superior to any manual labor. This is why Haesu is deeply humiliated by her menial jobs in America, while Chun accepts them quite well” (127). Chun is of a lower social class, which contributes to the unbalanced nature of his marriage: “For Haesu who is very much conscious of where she belongs in the Korean social hierarchy, and proud of her own class, the idea of obedience to a lower class husband become greatly problematic” (Shin 127-28). Shin ultimately argues that Haesu’s dogged adherence to her *yangban* ideals, even in a new country that does not care about her status, is a source of strength for her; however, there is no denying that it causes additional problems within the family, especially between Haesu and Chun. Chung-Hei Yun asserts in the article “Beyond ‘Clay Walls’: Korean American Literature” that the most pressing struggles for Chun and Haesu are the remnants of Korea that chase after them, namely Haesu’s *yangban* social status: “The tentacles of the old tradition encircle both Haesu and Chun, at times threatening to choke their precariously rooted existence. The tradition-clad social hierarchy binds Haesu” (87). Unwillingly exiled from Korea because of her husband, Haesu can neither overcome her resentment toward him nor reconcile her conflicted identity, even upon returning to Korea. As Yun states, “[S]he
realizes that her homeland under Japanese colonialism has ceased to be a home” (87). Jane Phillips similarly finds Haesu’s yangban social status to be the most significant factor putting Chun and Haesu at odds with one another. Chun operates outside of the yangban class, and the direction of his life in America, Phillips explains, is controlled by this factor: His “exclusion from the yangban class . . . has molded his marriage and influenced his decisions” (181).

As a woman, an immigrant woman, a Korean woman, and a yangban woman, Haesu of Ronyoung’s Clay Walls can be seen through the lenses of class, gender, and nationality, each of which fracture and complicate her unique identity. Younsook Na undertakes this discussion in the article “Positioning Haesu in Multiple Locations.” Haesu’s yangban class distinction, Na asserts, places her awkwardly between a formerly privileged life and that of a lower-class immigrant citizen, and she is also subject to her lower-class husband through a troubled marriage, which challenges her pride. Na notes that Haesu indeed submits to this gender oppression, including sexual violence, due to the patriarchal Confucian ideals that are rooted in her yangban class. Her longing for home amid her conflicted existence leads to involvement in the Korean nationalist movement, a structure that, Na finds, “revives her secure feelings of belonging” (317). However, Haesu’s involvement with this organization ultimately serves to again oppress her within a patriarchal structure: [T]he Korean nationalist movement of the NAK, ironically, takes a place of the Japanese colonizer in Korea, maintaining the same socio-political structure. . . . Haesu is unable to run counter to patriarchal values defined by men in a nationalist community” (318). Na concludes that these conflicting and inextricably linked veins of
Haesu’s identity, along with other roles she must fill as mother and financial provider, result in a type of schizophrenic identity. Agreeing with Yun and Phillips concerning Haesu’s identity, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, in her article “Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature,” asserts Haesu’s yangban status to be of more concern to her than even her female identity, thus driving her actions in the novel and becoming of paramount concern to her as she raises her children.

Scholars of Korean American literature specifically discussing Clay Walls allude to the link between mother and daughter as important. Pamela Thoma, in her article “Representing Korean American Female Subjects, Negotiating Multiple Americas, and Reading Beyond the Ending in Ronyoung Kim’s Clay Walls,” finds that young Faye and her mother Haesu share a difficult task as Korean American women: “Haesu and Faye must navigate multiple discourses in self formation . . . as Korean American women who struggle to define themselves and who perform valuable political and cultural labor as they negotiate the various discourses and structures that contribute to their articulations of who they are” (288). This linking of Haesu and Faye as they seek to define their identities lends to the larger discussion of mother-daughter relationships as significant features within Asian American and immigrant literature alike. Because, as scholars discuss, mothers emerge as such strong figures and, often, even replace the fathers economically and in child rearing, the mother-daughter relationship is an important avenue of exploration for scholars concerning the issues of identity—and their possible resolutions—in immigrant literature.
Immigrant literature scholars explore the problems within the mother-daughter relationship that stem from identity-related issues, finding that the daughters must choose how to define themselves—with their mothers or with the dominant American culture. Helen Bannan notes an important but problematic transmission occurring between mothers and daughters depicted in immigrant literature: “Immigrant women fought to survive, to preserve what they considered to be the essence of their cultural origins, and to pass on both survival skills and cultural traditions to their daughters” (165). While mothers representing traditional culture often experience oppression via the patriarchal values contained therein, the daughters perceive this, associating their mothers’ cultures with female submission. Mariolina Salvatori articulates the result of this troubling submission that protagonist Sara of *Bread Givers* observes in her mother—namely, rebellion: “With her mother’s complicity, Sara flees, in rage, from a future of servitude and back-breaking toil, and refuses any kind of marriage which will perpetuate this condition of subservience” (47). Esther Mikyung Ghymn discusses the problems within mother-daughter relationships specifically in two works of Asian American literature, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. She identifies daughter Anju of *The Woman Warrior* as feeling vulnerable because of her figuratively weak voice, a problem compounded by her mother’s criticism, and Anju engages in a continuous search for the strength to assert her personal identity. Ghymn identifies *The Joy Luck Club’s* central conflict as the cultural and generational gap between the mothers and their daughters, the literal misunderstandings of language that occur serving to symbolize deeper misunderstandings across time and space. During
adolescence, the daughters Bannan and Ghymn discuss clash with their mothers, as true to the nature of the immigrant parent-child relationship. Moreover, as Bannan states, guilt may haunt the daughter in later years if she has failed to express appreciation for her mother’s sacrifices. Because these mothers left their own mothers behind in their home countries, “Ambivalence and sorrow thus became traits inherited through the female line” (Bannan 167).

Scholars also point to the reconciliation and acceptance that occurs or is hinted toward within mother-daughter relationships in immigrant literature. Bannan finds that these mothers transmit important nonverbal lessons to their daughters that may supersede the subservience to male figures: “[M]any immigrant women mixed the oral messages prescribing submission for their daughters with a message of strength personified in their own lives” (165). These mothers may be teaching their daughters more by means of their examples of strength than by any education concerning traditional culture. A true reconciliation can occur, Bannan asserts, when mothers accept their daughters’ independent choices and daughters, in turn, choose to carry on certain aspects of their mothers’ cultures in their own lives, seeing the legacies of feminine strength they have inherited. The daughters Bannan discusses, as fictional and biographical writers, come to find they “could and did learn to understand their mothers . . . In the process of writing about their lives, they were moved by retrospective evaluation more than by literary convention to appreciate the strengths of the mothers they had once seen as subservient” (175). The mother, who is so often the primary source of strength depicted in immigrant literature, naturally chooses to transmit her values and strength, including her means of
navigating patriarchal structures, to her daughter. As Ghymn discusses concerning *The Woman Warrior*, daughter Anju eventually embraces her Chinese heritage through tales of her female ancestors’ strength. Finally, she is able to establish her own identity and accept her place in the circular, continuous nature of the mother-daughter bond. Moreover, Ghymn argues, the shared storytelling of Anju and her mother provides a means for reconciliation between them. No less than Anju of *The Woman Warrior*, Ghymn notes that each of Tan’s *Joy Luck* daughters must come to accept and appreciate her mother’s place in her life in order to attain awareness of and contentment with her own identity. This is also accomplished through the avenue of shared mother-daughter storytelling.

Asian American literary scholar Elaine H. Kim argues, in her article “‘Such Opposite Creatures’: Men and Women in Asian American Literature,” that female authors such as Tan and Kingston create a space for female characters to ultimately discover their strength, particularly through the construct of the mother-daughter relationship. Kim finds that, in *The Joy Luck Club*, the mother and her daughter engage in a dialogue that results in reconciliation: “Lines of transmission between mother and daughter are achieved outside the narrow linearity of ‘East’ to ‘West.’ . . . In *The Joy Luck Club*, the daughters discover that their mothers’ visions of ‘truth and hope’ are grounded not in Chinese convention but in fierce love, which makes them desire their daughters’ freedom and selfhood as well as their own” (82-3). These literary scholars find, as the daughters mature and accept the significance of their mothers’ roles and legacies in their lives and as they thrive in America without throwing off the cultural
heritage they received from their mothers, they also accept their mothers as part of their identities.

Among literary scholars, the works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan are the most frequently discussed concerning mother-daughter relationships within Asian American literature. However, such significant relationships can also be found in Korean American texts, as seen in scholarship concerning the novel *Comfort Woman*, notably Samina Najmi’s article “Decolonizing the Bildungsroman: Narratives of War and Womanhood in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*.” Najmi explains the nature of what this relationship accomplishes in the novel, which is the attainment of freedom as a female possession: “Keller genders freedom as a woman’s sense of rootedness in a community of women, especially as defined by mother and daughter” (228). As Najmi discusses, the freedom that mother and daughter finally achieve—Soon Kyo through death and Beccah through honoring and reconnecting with her mother—affirms that their bond is an essential component of their turbulent identity formation. Scholar Young Sook Jeong looks at Korean American mother-daughter relationships through her discussion of *Clay Walls* in a dissertation titled “Daughtering Asian American Women’s Literature in Maxine Hong Kingston, Nellie Wong, and Ronyoung Kim.” Jeong undertakes an analysis of the bond between mother and daughter in *Clay Walls*, referring to Haesu and Faye as having a “mentor and mentee relationship” (149). Jeong links the novel to two other Korean American novels, Marie Myung-Ok Lee’s *Somebody’s Daughter* and Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*, in order to explain how the narrative structures of these works allow for an in-text dialogue between mother and daughter. Because she considers all
these works to be semi-autobiographical for their Asian American female authors, Jeong states, “The narrative structures . . . show Asian American women’s desire to connect to and represent their mothers (also the father in *Clay Walls*’ case) from their mother’s perspectives as first-generation Asian Americans” (151). Jeong finds in *Clay Walls* that daughter Faye comes to define herself by learning from and about her mother and her mother’s history, eventually asserting her own independence but not by breaking from her mother. Faye is a bridge between her generation and her mother’s generation. Though An Na’s *A Step from Heaven* has not been specifically discussed in the light of mother-daughter relationships, Monica Chiu argues, in her article “The Cultural Production of Asian American Young Adults in the Novels of Marie G. Lee, An Na, and Doris Jones Yang,” that this novel is the only among the ones she considers that includes a positive and consistent adult female voice, that of narrator Young Ju’s mother. Chiu states:

> Uhmma’s behavior starkly contrasts with that of the relatively benign and domesticated mothers in Lee’s and Yang’s novels. . . . [S]he attempts to subvert her husband’s ideologies about girls’ inabilities to succeed, exposing herself to the wrath of an alcoholic and abusive man . . . After Apa [Young Ju’s father] returns to Korea in defeat, Mrs. Park raises two teenagers alone. (178)

Though Chiu is using these references as points of comparison to other, problematic female figures in young adult novels, her work hints toward the significant relationship between Young Ju and her mother, especially regarding Young Ju’s struggle to identify herself against the negative perceptions of her father.
Scholars find *A Step from Heaven* to be of significant value within Asian American literature and young adult literature for its realism. Neither relying on stereotypical or stagnant images of Asian Americans nor assimilation as the happy ending to identity crises, *A Step from Heaven* avoids these problematic depictions and is a fresh, realistic, and valuable contribution to the categories of young adult literature, immigrant literature, and Korean American literature alike. Chiu praises author An Na’s concern in the novel with depicting reality and avoiding the problematic characteristics common to other Asian American offerings within young adult literature: “All of the novels emphasize immigrant hardships, but it is in the telling and unfolding of these hardships that allow them to read either as ‘becoming American’ novels concluding in expected, Asian American success or that, like Na’s, reference the continued, often hidden, pain of immigrant struggles” (178). Fellow young adult literary scholar Lisa Habegger similarly extols the novel in her article “Why Are Realistic Young Adult Novels So Bleak?: An Analysis of Bleak Realism in *A Step from Heaven*.” Habegger notes that *A Step from Heaven* offers complex characters, specifically through the voice of the first-person narrator, Young Ju, as real portrayals of people with multifaceted personalities. The novel also uses sparse but lyrical language in short, vignette-like chapters, which, Habegger states, offers accessible truths to young adult readers. Though a narrator like Young Ju may deal with difficult truths, Habegger points out, she does not lose hope, showing that both realism and hope can be present as offerings of bleak realism in young adult works. Scholar Heinz Insu Fenkl, in an article titled “The Future of Korean American Literature,” also finds *A Step from Heaven* to be a reflection of a refreshing new trend in
Korean American young adult literature. Fenkl states, “Although relatively complex works like An Na’s *A Step from Heaven* (2002) are finally beginning to emerge in the Young Adult category, they are still overshadowed by works . . . [that are] superficial by academic standards [and] exemplify the kind of exotification and Orientalism that makes literary scholars wince” (21). Indeed, as the winner of the 2002 Michael L. Printz Award, a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award, and a *New York Times* Best Book of the Year, among other awards, *A Step from Heaven* has garnered much praise since its publication.

Both *A Step from Heaven* and *Clay Walls* are grounded in the realities of the Korean American immigrant experience. They explore the identity struggles that come with being young, female, and Korean American and are written by female Korean American authors who faced their own issues of identity as individuals and as part of an immigrant family. Though classified as a novel, *Clay Walls* is widely considered semi-autobiographical, as author Kim Ronyoung is the daughter of first-generation Korean immigrants herself. In a short biography, “The Korean American Novel: Kim Ronyoung,” written by Ronyoung’s daughter, Kim Hahn, the similarities between the author’s life and the novel emerge. Ronyoung grew up in the 1920s and 30s in California as Faye does. Ronyoung’s mother, just as in the novel, was of the *yangban* class and her father of the lower class; she also lost her father at a young age as Faye does. Just as the novel ends with the possibility of Faye’s engagement to a young Korean American medical student, Ronyoung herself married a Korean American doctor. Ronyoung’s concern, her daughter says, was to tell her mother’s story before Ronyoung herself died


of cancer. In Ronyoung’s own words, from the book jacket of *Clay Walls*’ first edition, this story is not that of a single woman but a group she cannot be separated from: “A whole generation of Korean immigrants and their American born children could have lived and died in the United States without anyone knowing they had been there. I could not let that happen.” Author An Na, like *A Step from Heaven*’s narrator, Young Ju, was born in Korea and emigrated with her family at a young age. Though the novel is considered a work of fiction, Na states that it is partly the fruition of her own complicated identity as a young Korean American immigrant: “*A Step from Heaven* grew from a need to express some of the longings and frustrations that I felt as an immigrant growing up in America.” Addressing the question of autobiography, she gives an open-ended answer that allows for a link between her life and her narrator’s: “Many people ask me if this novel is autobiographical and I always respond by saying yes and no. . . . What the protagonist and I do share are some of the feelings of yearning, joy, and shame that come with trying to negotiate a foreign culture.”

The issue of finding and defining identity is one that simply cannot be escaped in the scholarship on immigrant literature. This theme resounds in the discussions of scholars within both Asian American and Korean American literature. They identify, as a significant force ensuring the family’s continued existence, that the immigrant mother, out of necessity, takes on a new identity and becomes, in many cases, stronger and more influential in the family than the father. Scholars assert that to the daughter, then, falls the unique opportunity to inherit her mother’s strength and embrace her mother’s cultural values. The mother-daughter relationship is not a new theme in immigrant or Asian
American literature; however, a discussion of the inheritance of strength and transmission of cultural heritage that occurs between immigrant mother and daughter—and the subsequent shaping of both mother’s and daughter’s identities that occurs therein—has not been undertaken using two Korean American novels. For their portrayals of a nuclear Korean family and the change and conflict that results from emigration, for their realistic pictures of the identity struggles most pressing to an adolescent female of a Korean immigrant family, for their use of these females as first-person narrators whose articulation is key to their identity formation, and for their depictions of a strong mother as the most significant force in each daughter’s life, Kim Ronyoung’s *Clay Walls* and An Na’s *A Step from Heaven* are excellently poised for my discussion.
Chapter 3: Immigrant Family Dynamics

The Korean American families of *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven*, though set apart by decades, encounter common struggles after their immigration that serve as the impetus for the shifting of familial roles. Their circumstances of arrival differ; Chun of *Clay Walls* has escaped to America during a time of political upheaval in Korea, with his new wife to follow him, while the Park family of An Na’s *A Step from Heaven* leaves Korea and starts a new life in the United States as a unit: husband, wife, and their daughter, Young Ju. It is through Young Ju’s narration, beginning when she is about four years old, that we observe her family’s precarious existence amid poverty and the culture shock of living in America. In *Clay Walls*, on the other hand, author Kim Ronyoung uses a third-person narrative perspective filtered through wife Haesu—in the novel’s first and longest section—to show the poverty, discrimination, and alienation her family experiences, initially as a young married couple and then as a family with three young children. Both novels’ depictions provide a place for a strong mother figure to grow and emerge, even subtly, and take her place as the head of the family when the father is unable to make the transition of immigration. He may live in America, but, mentally and emotionally, he cannot reconcile himself with adapting to a new role within his changing family.

*A Step from Heaven*’s Park family seeks the “better life” that has drawn immigrant families to the United States for centuries, and their preconceptions of America are similar to those of numerous immigrant accounts. Their expectations fit the universal pattern identified by immigrant literary theorist William Boelhower, even
though his study was based on a sampling of novels depicting the experiences of European immigrants. In fact, even tiny Young Ju can recognize the power of the “American dream” for her family as they prepare for their move: “Mi Gook [Korean for America]. This is a magic word. It can make Uhmma [Mother] and Apa [Father] stop fighting like some important person is knocking on the door” (11). America comes to represent hope and opportunity, and Young Ju describes these expectations, the idealism perhaps foreshadowing what is to come for her family:

Apa says that in Mi Gook everyone can make lots of money even if they did not go to an important school in the city. Uhmma says all the uhmmas in Mi Gook are pretty like dolls. And they live in big houses. Much bigger than the rich fish factory man’s house in the village. Even Ju Mi, my friend who is one year older and likes to boss me around, says she would like to go to Mi Gook. . . . Now every time Apa says Mi Gook, he smiles so big I think he is a doggy like Mi Shi. When we are eating our dinner, Apa and Uhmma can only say Mi Gook all the time. No more mean eyes over the rice bowl. (11)

Young Ju comes to equate “Mi Gook” with heaven after she is told they will fly in an airplane to get there. Essentially viewing America as a land of perfection that will solve their existing family problems, the members of the Park family can only be disappointed by the reality.

*Clay Walls* begins amid the reality of the Chun family’s immigrant life in America. Because of their impoverished circumstances, Haesu must do menial work that
she feels is far beneath her upper-class *yangban* status. While cleaning toilets for a wealthy woman, Haesu is embarrassed and belittled, and her pride leads her to quit. Her employer ignorantly refers to her as “yellow,” which reflects the discriminatory treatment Haesu and Chun face daily. Haesu ponders this as she rides the streetcar: “Her country’s history went back thousands of years but no one in America seemed to care. To her dismay, few Americans knew where Korea was. This was 1920. The United States was supposed to be a modern country. Yet to Americans, Koreans were ‘oriental’, the same as Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino” (7). When her family has the means to purchase their own house, Haesu goes looking for the right investment. The owner of the house she chooses tells her the house costs much more than it is really worth, hoping to discourage an ‘oriental’ from purchasing it. They have their friend Charlie Bancroft purchase the house on their behalf and plan to transfer it to their American-born son when he is an adult.

Through Haesu we also see language struggles, a common concern of the immigrant experience. Although she is learning, Haesu does not feel fully able to express herself when she speaks the English language. In a particularly confrontational encounter, “Everything she wanted to say came to her in Korean” (51). Her feelings of limitation contrast with the comfort she feels when being able to simply observe rather than interact with others in a foreign tongue: “She enjoyed her rides on streetcars, becoming familiar with the foreign land without suffering the embarrassment of having to speak its language” (6). Frustrated with the tedious work and embarrassment that goes with taking an English language class, Haesu finds another means to learn when she goes to the movies:
Haesu made a delightful discovery. She was able to follow the story by reading the captions, able to make connections between what a person said and what he did. Settling back into her seat, she found movies were an entertaining way to learn about life in America, much more satisfying than from rides on streetcars, and much less embarrassing than reciting in front of a class. (32-33)

Language issues eventually surface within the family because Haesu does not learn English as well as her children learn it through their schooling. As a result, it becomes necessary for them to serve as interpreters, often begrudgingly, in difficult situations. Though Haesu’s English may be limited, her perspective is unhindered by language barriers, and through her we see her family’s struggles as Korean immigrants.

_A Step from Heaven_’s young narrator is Haesu’s counterpart to illustrate the struggles with language their respective families face after immigration. At first, Young Ju’s attempts to understand and communicate in English in her kindergarten class are endearing. She practices such words as “lunch,” which sounds to her like “Laanchu” (31), and “goldfish,” which she hears as “Go-do-feesh” (32). As she grows up, however, the language issues become more complicated and touch at the core of her identity as a Korean American girl. She worries over such things as what “going” with a boy means, feeling limited in her ability to understand and express herself with her peers. She says, “I have found that the dictionary doesn’t always explain everything. . . . ‘Who do you want to go with?’ they ask. I pretend to understand, but in the dictionary it says ‘go’ and ‘going’ mean action, moving, and lots of other things like business transactions. None of
it makes sense to me” (52). Her concern over language creates tension for her at home because she cannot practice her English with her family: “Young Ju, Apa orders . . . speak Korean” (53). Young Ju expresses her frustration, through her first-person narration, at being a child of two languages and two cultures: “I do not understand why I have to speak Korean at home so I will not forget where I come from. Why did we move to America if I am to speak English only at school? But I do not argue with Apa” (53). As language often hinders Young Ju, such instances sharpen the focus on the significance of her narration, which liberates her to explore her most deep-seated concerns over her family and her own identity.

The Park family’s early life in America is marked by poverty, and their immigration to America worsens Uhmma and Apa’s strained relationship rather than solves it as Young Ju expected. While Uhmma wishes to continue living with Apa’s sister after they immigrate, Mr. Park’s pride prevents the family from being reliant on other people. He rents them a house in poor condition and chides Uhmma for wishing they could save money for a nicer house: “What did I just tell you! Apa shouts. Woman, were you listening? Did you hear anything I said? I do not want to grovel anymore like some bitch. What is saving money going to do? What? Get you a fancy house? Is that what you want? I cannot provide you with enough?” (33-34). Though Uhmma promises to get two jobs, Apa himself is unsatisfied with the menial jobs he must work in America, such as “picking up those lawyers’ trash like some beggar” (34). In a moment where we can see her sympathy toward her father for what he has to face in America, Young Ju observes the toll of this work on her father: “Most times Apa’s hands are dark and hard
with dirt from his gardening job. Other times they are rough and peeling from his cleaning job” (40).

The reality of life in America has fallen far short of the Park family’s expectations. Though Uhmma is willing to work hard at any job to keep her family afloat, Apa resents Uhmma for encouraging him to move their family to America. While he has a history of alcoholism and abusive behavior, it is only worsened by their immigration because he feels undermined, undervalued, and, unless he is physically abusing his wife and children, powerless. His wife becomes his equal in providing financially for the family, and he no doubt feels stripped of his role as the patriarch, the only one he knows. While Apa becomes increasingly alienated from his family, Uhmma strives to maintain a close relationship with her children, especially Young Ju, and she seeks a support network for herself outside the home by making friends at work and attending church.

Haesu’s primary concern in *Clay Walls* is that she not allow her family’s low social status in America—as non-European immigrants—to shape her identity or, eventually, those of her children. She even resents having to impose on the generosity of their Korean friends, the Yims, who provide them food and shelter when they are unable to make sufficient money for their needs. She is determined to hold onto the pride of her *yangban* birthright, and it angers her that her husband Chun allows himself to be demeaned. She tells him, “I’ll never understand how you do it, how you can remain mute while someone orders you to come here, go there, do this, do that . . . like you were some trained animal. They call you a houseboy. A twenty-five year old man being called ‘boy’” (10). Chun’s reply reveals his view of his wife’s ideals, which led her to give up a
valuable source of income as a cleaning woman: “No work, no pay. No money, no house, no food, no nothing. It’s as simple as that” (10).

The strain of immigration on Chun and Haesu’s marriage manifests itself quickly; indeed, the polarization of their views due to class difference becomes clear. Haesu says, “That’s not good enough for me and I won’t disgrace my family by resorting to menial labor” (10). What follows for the Chun family is a subtle but important shift in the familial roles. Rather than being submissive, obeying her husband, and not begrudging him for the work he chooses—as patriarchal Korean tradition would dictate—Haesu essentially steers the direction of her family’s future by suggesting Chun start selling fruit from a street cart, which eventually leads to a successful family grocery business. Her pride guides her ambition for her family, and this ambition largely determines the family’s success. She says, “All I care about is that we be our own boss” (10). Chun’s role as head of the family is undermined from this moment on. Although he does eventually succeed at the business, he knows his lower-class status would not have pushed him to seek a better life in the same way that his wife’s yangban status does, so her preferences and her pride rule the home. However, it is not a simple relationship because Korean patriarchal culture requires that Haesu be submissive to her husband. Haesu uses more subtle and divisive means than outright disobedience to influence Chun.

Chun and Haesu’s sexual relationship is a powerful manifestation in the novel of the complicated power dynamics within the family. Haesu fulfills her expected wifely duty; however, her pride will not allow her to do so in a passionate, loving way within this arranged marriage of hers. She disdains the sexual act, calling it “That thing” (30).
Because his wife has undermined his power within the family, Chun uses sex as a means to assert himself. What Haesu afterward refers to as “what he did to me” is described in this scene:

She was awakened by the grip of Chun’s hands around her waist. He turned her on her back and held her firmly as he entered her. Mechanically, he thrust himself in and out until semen seeped from him. He then fell away from her. Without a word, he turned his back to her to go to sleep.

Haesu lay in the dark, humiliation crawled over her like damp moss. Bitterly, she vowed she would never respond to his advances. (30)

Though Haesu never forgets this incident, Chun too continues to be crippled by his wife’s lack of affection for him. As a coping mechanism for the struggles he faces with the business and in his relationship with his wife, Chun eventually has an affair.

Outside the home, Haesu finds that discrimination is not simply a problem in the early years after her immigration. Neither does it pardon her American-born children. Haesu eventually discovers that the discrimination against her family goes beyond citizenship and that she cannot prevent it from touching her children. After her sons, Harold and John, are picked on in public school—being called names like ‘chink’—she attempts to enroll them in a private military academy. The admissions officer tells her, “This school was established for Anglo-Saxon Protestant boys” (51). Though Haesu assures him that they are Presbyterian and that her sons are American-born citizens, he eventually tells her “the Academy does not accept orientals” (51). Haesu is stunned by
this discrimination: “As she began to understand, her face turned hot. She felt her pulse throbbing in her throat, choking her” (51). As Haesu confronts discrimination, so too will her daughter eventually have to face such assaults on her fragile sense of identity.

With A Step from Heaven’s Young Ju telling the stories of her family’s life like snapshots of memory—rather than a continuous narrative—the reader doesn’t encounter every experience the Park family undergoes after they immigrate. However, it becomes clear that their family life is strained, with Uhmma serving as a positive force holding the family together and Apa’s violent, inconsistent behavior pulling it apart. Though the birth of a little brother for Young Ju gives her father hope that he will have a son who succeeds in America, the family cannot escape Apa’s anger, especially when money is a concern. As a third-grader Young Ju observes: “I know Uhmma is still thinking about how Apa yelled and said there was no money for such foolishness like the fair” (47). Young Ju is no doubt absorbing the concerns of her parents, as she says of their house: “I see our house that is not really our house. Apa still says that someday we will buy a house of our own. For now we are renting. For now has been a long time” (49-50).

On a rare, treasured occasion, Apa will play with Young Ju and her brother Joon Ho, pretending he is “the Blob” and roughhousing with them on the carpet. Young Ju’s articulation of what these moments mean for her shows the need for such a father figure—one that is more consistent—in both her and her brother’s lives:

Sometimes after Apa leaves we have a carpet burn on our knee. Or a bruise on our arm. But that does not matter. We still wait and wait. Hope and hope. Like watching the sky for snow on Christmas even though the
Because he is unable to adapt and discontent with his life—with his identity as a Korean immigrant in America—Apa cannot be the man he needs to be for his children or his wife.

Rather than being able to relish in many such moments of carefree play, the children of both novels have very adult responsibilities thrust upon them. In *Clay Walls*, son Harold translates what the juvenile court judge says to his mother during proceedings concerning his brother John. He understands the context of the situation better than his mother does, so he tells his mother to “Just say, ‘thank you’” to the judge. Though he is trying to navigate such a difficult situation as best as he can, Harold is soon reprimanded by his mother. Faye says, “I knew from the look Momma had given him that Harold was in trouble. She waited until we got home to speak to him. ‘Don’t ever forget that I am your mother. Under no circumstances are you to tell me what to say,’ she told him” (207). Faye too must deal with such language-related responsibilities, such as reading a letter to her mother from the court and taking a phone call from a police officer who calls about John because Haesu cannot understand what he is saying.

In *A Step from Heaven*, Young Ju feels obligated to take on the responsibility of serving as a parent figure for her brother with Apa’s frequent absence from the home andUhmma’s hectic work schedule. She says to him, “Joon, where were you today? This was the second call this week. You know you’re supposed to be at school” (131). She
continues to implore him to return to school, and the words between them become hurtful. Because of the strain immigration has placed on their families, these children must take on roles beyond their years. Conflict inevitably results, and such interactions have a powerful influence on each child’s sense of self within the family.

The parents’ cultural expectations further complicate the children’s navigation of identity, especially within the father-son relationship. The expectations each Korean father has for his sons is particularly evident against the backdrop of American culture. Eventually, as Mr. Park becomes increasingly troubled and ill-tempered, he doesn’t even withhold his anger from his son, whom he normally treats with a preference noticeable to Young Ju. In this instance, she must watch her younger brother be punished for not meeting Apa’s expectation that he be manly and strong at such a young age:

Joon’s face twitches as he tries to recompose himself, tries to relax the corners of his eyes and focus on something over Apa’s shoulder. I know the technique, how to look blank and as if you are listening when really you are trying to fly away from your body. You can’t let Apa know what you are thinking or it will be worse. . . .

Say it all, Apa snarls, biting down on his lower lip.

I forgot how to be a man, Joon says. A betraying tear slides down his face and Joon hurries to brush it off.

What are you crying for?

Joon shrugs.

Wrong answer. Apa slams his hand across Joon’s face. (67)
Mr. Park seems obsessed with teaching his son the behavior he believes will validate his place as a man in America: “Apa continues, In this world, only the strong survive. Only the strong can make their future. If you cry and whine like a girl, who is going to listen to you? Who? If you talk like a man, fight like a man, you will get what you want in this world. Do you understand?” (68).

Chun of *Clay Walls* has expectations of manly behavior from his sons as well: “Harold’s voice of authority had pleased him. Chun wanted his sons to command the respect of their playmates. The game provided good training, he thought. It encouraged the boys to develop confidence and kowtow to no one” (157). However, Chun also realizes their need to be children while they can, wishing for them to have the sort of carefree childhood he never had: “Chun liked waking to the sound of children playing and witnessing the pleasures of his sons’ boyhood. They were the sounds of delight in the New World. His playground had been the silent earth” (157). Mr. Park, on the other hand, is only teaching his children that he is the sort of father they can neither rely on nor trust: “Apa turns as if to leave and then pivots back around. He balances on one leg and swiftly kicks Joon in the stomach” (68-69). Once he regains his breath after this abuse, Joon’s first words to his sister are “I hate him” (69). Young Ju can see Apa, at times, through more sympathetic eyes, as she observes of Apa the night he learns his mother has died, “Who is this man crying like an abandoned child?” (94). However, in the same breath, she refers to him as “my Apa who growls instead of talks” (94).

Young Ju’s narration reveals a father who is crumbling under the pressure of surviving as part of a Korean immigrant family in America. The father-son bond between
Mr. Park and Joon is irreparably damaged by the abuse; Young Ju observes a resultant trait of her brother’s: “the way his nostrils flare and stay flared, the way they get after a lecture and a few cuffs on the head or a kick in the stomach from Apa” (124). Though Apa had been abusive even in Korea, causing his own daughter and mother, Young Ju’s grandmother, or Halmoni, to hide in fear, the fact that he now—in America—has no more power within his family to earn money and achieve success than does his wife compounds such problems. Mr. Park’s behavior could be read as simply that of an alcoholic; perhaps he has other issues of emotional or mental instability. However, Apa cannot exist within a vacuum, and, with his family now a Korean American immigrant family, their issues and struggles indeed fit the sociological pattern of many Korean and Asian American families as established by scholars.

Perhaps out of necessity or perhaps from her inherent strength of character, in A Step from Heaven, Uhmma emerges as the parent most connected to and concerned with what the family needs—and needs to become—in order to thrive as immigrants in America. Rather than living in shame of their circumstances as her husband does, Mrs. Park will, literally, save every penny she needs in order to care for her family: “Uhmma loves her pennies, collects them like flowers in an old glass vase she found at a garage sale. More than once Uhmma’s pennies have saved the weekly groceries. I am embarrassed when Uhmma puts down a million pennies and the clerk snarls as she counts out the change” (75). In one particular chapter, Young Ju begins by observing this scene of her father worrying over the family’s financial situation:
A rectangle. Picture frame. Doorway. Apa sits at his card table desk, both elbows on the surface. He holds a piece of paper up to his face, moving his lips, feeling his way among the foreign words. He puts the paper back down and cups his chin with one hand; the other hand punches numbers into a calculator. The small green desk lamp on the far corner of his table throws the shadows of his face deeper, longer. Into the night. (95)

By the end of the chapter, in a powerful articulation of how the family dynamics are irrevocably changing, Young Ju has replaced the scene with an image of her mother:

A rectangle. Picture frame. Doorway. Uhmma sits at Apa’s card table desk, both elbows on the surface. She holds the checkbook up to her face, moving her lips, feeling her way among the numbers. She puts the checkbook down and cups her chin with one hand; the other hand punches numbers into a calculator. While she checks the numbers on the calculator against the numbers in the checkbook, Uhmma absent-mindedly rubs her thumb back and forth. Back and forth over the unfamiliar nakedness of her ring finger. The small green desk lamp on the far corner of the table throws the shadows of her face deeper, longer. Into the night. (97)

Here we see that Uhmma has sacrificed what is likely one of her most prized material possessions, her wedding ring, in order to make ends meet in the household. Though Young Ju, in public, may be embarrassed by her mother’s frugality, thinking she looks like a “poor Oriental who saves pennies like gold” (75), Uhmma’s strength and optimism
prevail even while her husband is self-destructing. Just as Uhmma sits at Apa’s desk, she too comes to stand in his place, able to shoulder the family as he is not.

Chun, much like Uhmma, is willing to work hard without complaint, day after day, in order to provide for his family. It is not an inability to provide for his family but the combined strain of his marriage to proud Haesu and the immense responsibility of running his own business that initiates his eventual crumbling. The stress of Chun’s business eats away at him, causing him even to lash out at his young son: “Unlike Harold [their first son], everything John did seemed to get on Chun’s nerves. He rarely held the baby and when John became old enough to toddle about, Chun held him responsible for infractions that were clearly Harold’s doing. Haesu blamed it on Chun’s abnormal working hours” (41). When Haesu confronts Chun about his behavior, he replies by saying, “I can’t quit now. . . . The business is all I’ll have to leave my sons” (41). The pressure of what he must achieve in order to support his family—and keep up with the finer things his wife’s pride requires—pushes him further and further outside his family. Though everything he does is to ensure a secure future for his family, he cannot enjoy his family as it grows for fear of falling back into poverty and becoming subject to Haesu’s derision. Chun may support the family, but there is no doubt that Haesu and her *yangban* mindset essentially run the home.

As Haesu’s pride guides her amid her family’s struggles in *Clay Walls*, she further asserts her cultural pride by working with the active Korean nationalist community in Los Angeles. This nationalism is her means of coping with the loss of her homeland and the loss of recognition for her social status. When Haesu hears that conditions are improved
in Korea, nothing can deter her from returning with her children, even if it means leaving her husband behind to run the business and wait for her word. As they board the ship that will take them to Korea, Haesu tells Chun, “Don’t forget, you’re not to do anything about the house until you hear from me” (67). This physical separation mirrors the separation Chun feels from his *yangban* wife and his own children as her *yangban* descendants: “Standing alone, he looked as if he had been abandoned” (67).

Something of Chun’s own mindset is revealed in Part Two of *Clay Walls*, which is narrated through his perspective. Regarding his betrothal and marriage, Chun observes,

> He had no idea Haesu had protested. The marriage contract was made with such ease that he had assumed she wanted him. He learned after they were married that she had no love for him. What can a man do with news like that, he asked himself. He had wanted to be the source of her happiness and was told he was the source of her misery. She tried to make him feel unworthy of her, but he was determined not to grovel for her love. It would just be a matter of time, he had told himself. . . . He was still waiting. (142)

This waiting, as he works so hard for his family, eventually comes to be too much for Chun. He does not wish to become the sort of domineering force in his household that Mr. Park of *A Step from Heaven* is; however, he does yearn for some regard as the man of the house, if only through amorous physical attention from his wife. He eventually finds this affection through an extramarital affair with a woman named Loretta Lyu, the wife of a fellow Korean who is one of Chun’s business associates:
He had no reason to resist her [Loretta]. . . . He never got her to his bed. She wanted him everywhere but there. He did not mind; it was as if the sanctity of his marriage had been preserved. . . . He wasn’t afraid Haesu would learn of his ‘affair’ because he was certain she would not be jealous. She would turn it into justification for her opinion of his unseemly sexual appetite. (146-47)

This affair and his gambling addiction are Chun’s coping mechanisms and the makings of his self-destruction. When Chun, through no fault of his own, eventually loses his grocery business’s largest contract with the government, he cannot resist the temptation to gamble the last of his family’s savings. He has lost the business, the only aspect of his life through which he can assert himself as a man, so he feels he has nothing to lose. As Chun and his friends gamble over a dice game, images of maleness pepper the scene:

Chun threw an old Army blanket on the floor . . . One last hot breath then he squatted to give the dice a short sharp throw across the blanket. The men knelt for a closer look as the cubes bounced about like a pair of decapitated heads . . . Putting his money where everyone could see it was a player’s declaration that he was in the game. Green bills were spread like peacock feathers in some hands, neatly folded and woven between the fingers in one and, in Samsung’s case, crumpled and seen through the chinks of his tightly closed fist. . . . Karl butt in before Samsung could say
anything. “I was just going to ask you if you was a basketweaver, Bill, the way you knit your money in and out of your fingers like that.” (159)

Spurred on by such masculine energy, Chun later loses everything in a high-stakes card game.

Chun does not stop to think that he may lose his family, but his alienation from them—with the line drawn between his lower-class and their upper-class status—is already in place. He loses the money and, in the process, becomes a pathetic man who knows he is unable to be what his family needs. In the final depiction of Chun before he leaves his family, we can see the potent mixture of emotions that overwhelms him:

His smile erupted into laughter, laughter that would not stop, a vomit of laughter that made tears stream down his cheeks. Suddenly, a chill came over him. The air felt as raw as Sunchoun in winter and his teeth began to chatter. He longed to lie with Haesu, to press against her satin underslip and warm his hands on her breasts. His longing ceased when he realized he would have to tell her what he had done.

Chun shuddered and rubbed his arms. (182)

For the remaining portion of the novel, daughter Faye’s first-person narrative, Chun is physically absent but sometimes a haunting force in the family’s lives. He eventually dies alone in Reno, his death meaning little more to his family than his abandoning them: “None of us could imagine Papa dead. Death was just a word” (222). In fact, the matter of Chun’s death certificate ultimately reveals the cruel nature of the disconnect between
Chun and his family, even between Chun and his cultural heritage: “For ‘color or race’ they wrote ‘Chinese’ ” (222).

The upheaval of immigration and its associated pains result in specific struggles for the sons of both families, both before and after the fathers disappear from their lives. Amid discrimination and the pangs of adolescence, Chun and Haesu’s two sons, Harold and John, struggle with issues of identity, regardless of whether they are ever able to articulate such concerns. They experience their biggest crises after their father leaves the family to work in Reno. John gets into trouble in his neighborhood, repeatedly committing theft, and is tried in juvenile court. Harold leaves to find a job in Fresno, and Faye gets a glimpse into both of her brothers’ minds when John says, “Jesus, Faye, You don’t know anything. He [Harold] went away to get away” (233). In this instance, John himself is still stealing property and deceiving his mother. The way he antagonizes Faye for her naiveté reveals that he and his brother are indeed having a much different experience within the family with the absence of their father.

When World War II begins, Harold wants to enlist as an officer in the Air Force. Despite scoring in the top ten percent on his examination, he receives a rejection letter. He is eventually told, “It has nothing to do with your score. . . . Orientals are not allowed in officers’ training. . . . It’s nothing personal” (270). Although his mother is the most openly disappointed at his rejection, to Harold, it is no doubt a case of discrimination touching his life in a very personal way. Despite the fact that these sons are American born and educated, they cannot escape the Korean side of their identity. With their father—the only model of a Korean man they have in their lives—absent from the home,
Harold and John seem perpetually unhinged and ill-equipped to handle the difficulties coming from both within and outside of the home.

In *A Step from Heaven*, the family’s son, Joon, too experiences a painful adolescence. Through Young Ju’s narration, we observe him in a growing disconnect from his family and his responsibilities, in this instance repeatedly missing school: “The middle school secretary call for the second time this week. ‘Joon Park was not in school again today. He has been absent or tardy sixteen times this semester,’ she says. ‘He will flunk if he continues this pattern.’ ‘Yes, I understand,’ I mumble into the phone” (130). As with Faye and her brothers, we see the distance between Young Ju and her brother as she says, “But I don’t understand. I don’t know where Joon goes, what he does” (130). She further describes her brother’s behavior, articulating that he is becoming like the man he hates: “Some days Joon does not come home until almost ten o’clock, just a few hours before Uhmma would catch him. He is becoming more like Apa, only wandering home when he needs sleep or food” (130). Young Ju observes that all Joon does is “Draw for hours behind his closed door, coming out only when he needs to eat” (130). Even his physical appearance and demeanor change. Joon shaves his head, wears black clothing, and has, Young Ju describes, “a new walk that reminds me of a vulture” (131). It is implied that Joon is becoming involved with drugs when Young Ju says, “Up close, I notice that Joon’s eyes are bloodshot, his eyelids heavy and drooping” (132). In the most painful realization for Young Ju of who her brother is becoming, she says, “I fight the impulse to reach up and touch his eyes, to check and make sure they really belong to Joon and not some sad grandfather, homeless and lying in the street” (132). The author creates
a sympathetic character in Joon, most specifically regarding the impact having such a father as Apa has on him. Young Ju tries to parent her brother as best as she can and threatens to tell Apa of his truancy. Though he doesn’t say much to his sister, Joon articulates much of his pain concerning his father when he says, “It’s not like he’s ever home anyway” (131).

*A Step from Heaven’s* Mr. Park similarly succumbs to his own addiction as *Clay Walls’* Chun does. As Apa’s wife confronts him one night when he comes home intoxicated, he reveals his inner pain, which stems from his inability to succeed as a provider and a family head. He says,

> You think I am worthless. I see it in your eyes. A son who does not even go to his own uhmma’s funeral. A husband who does not provide you with enough. You always want more. But there is nothing. Look, we have nothing. My best is always not enough. Get away from me. You are strangling me to death with your hopes. (96)

Though he places the blame on his wife for having unreasonable expectations—the same wife who dutifully saves every penny and sells her wedding ring when money is lacking—we can see the crushing burden that he feels unequipped to carry, even many years after the original displacement. Eventually, he is arrested for drunk driving and begins to beat his wife more severely. As Young Ju describes, “Dark splotches of blue and purple camouflage Uhmma’s bare back and shoulders” (127).

Finally, when Apa attacks Young Ju and her mother, nearly killing them, she stands up for both of them and calls the police. A few months after his arrest and release,
Mr. Park returns to Korea for good. When Apa’s sister offers to fund the family’s return as well, Uhmma answers, “My strong children and I will be fine without Apa” (143), and so they remain in America without him. Through their joint efforts of strength and love, mother and daughter are able to survive Apa’s abuse and carry on after his abandonment of the family.

The fathers of both *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven* can no longer fill the patriarchal roles they have built their lives and shaped their identities around; neither can they share the role of provider and family head with their wives—or allow her to steer the family’s future. From each of their respective families Papa and Apa suddenly disappear, but the mothers who are left behind have been growing strong through the years, and they are able to fully step in to spearhead the family.
Chapter 4: Mother-Daughter Relationships

The fathers of both novels—Chun of *Clay Walls* and Mr. Park of *A Step from Heaven*—simply cannot resolve their conflicted identities as Korean men in America and as men within families that are shouldered equally, if not more so, by their wives. Though Haesu’s pride may have been partly to blame for Chun’s growing separation from his family and his slide into addiction, she knows no other way to preserve her family’s future but to accept only the best for them. As Chun leaves the family circle, Haesu becomes the core of the family, and we can look expectantly to her relationship with daughter Faye as both women face the challenge of finding their identities as Korean American women. For, from the day Faye was born, “Faye was her responsibility, Harold and John were Chun’s” (46). Uhmma as a mother, on the other hand, seems to have no potential to be ashamed when it comes to providing what her family needs—a trait that has carried them through otherwise impossible times. More importantly, she is bestowing on her daughter a valuable sense of self, never letting her forget her power as a female adolescent, a girl who can counteract the negative influence of her father in her life through determination and strength of character. On the day her baby brother was brought home from the hospital, Young Ju learned her father would not hold her as a baby: “Everyone laughs. I stare down at my bows. Apa did not even want to hold me” (39). As her father’s abuse and belittlement has made Young Ju look down, look away, and look outside of her family for a means of identification, eventually she and Faye too will be able to look and find their mothers, realizing they have been there speaking such messages of strength to them all along. Moreover, each mother must learn to allow her
daughter to navigate her own, separate identity, which allows the mothers and daughters in both novels to find a partnership with each other, a mutually beneficial relationship that helps them reconcile their conflicted identities.

The relationship between mother Haesu and daughter Faye in *Clay Walls* is not, at first glance, an inherently close one. Haesu’s single-minded pride and desire to provide a better life for her children—that is, by her Korean standards—clash with her children’s American attitudes. The cultural rift between Haesu and her children becomes quite apparent when she brings them home with her to Korea. It is nothing like home to the children: “ ‘I don’t know this place,’ John declared. ‘L.A.’s my home.’ He held his nose. ‘It stinks here.’ ” (98). Harold, John, and Faye can only view Korea and its poor conditions due to the Japanese occupation through their perspectives as American-born and raised children, despite what they may have heard from their mother. They do not understand the cultural value of such a trip and have no inherent appreciation for their mother’s motherland. In this case, Haesu tries to understand their perspectives rather than punish and dismiss her children’s distaste for Korea: “She wanted her children to feel neither pity nor scorn for her people . . . their people. She also realized that it wasn’t her children’s fault that they were accustomed to paved streets, cement sidewalks, and flush toilets. ‘It isn’t anyone’s fault. You’ll get used to it,’ she assured her children, softening her tone” (98).

Being back in Korea with her children allows Haesu to reflect on her relationship with her own mother, which gives valuable context to Haesu’s evolving relationship with her daughter, Faye:
Haesu started to undress. She watched as Mama began to remove the pins from her hair. As a child, she had been entranced by the movement of the thick black strands as they fell to form a screen across her mother’s back. The ritual had signaled the close of a day, mother and daughter drawn together for a night of sleep. She longed for the comfort a child derives from believing in her mother, to feel safe in the intimacy of their sharing the women’s quarters. (111)

These intimate rituals are undoubtedly significant to Haesu’s sense of womanhood. However, Haesu and Faye share no such intimacy between them in America, if only because such sleeping arrangements are not followed in America. To see Haesu so ‘longing for comfort’—after having been cut off from her mother when she moved to America—gives us a sense of why Haesu cannot mother Faye in the traditional Korean way that she values. It may be simply too painful for her.

Perhaps an even more painful fact for Haesu is that the Korea of her childhood no longer exists. She is aware, to an extent, of the poor conditions in Korea from her family’s letters, but she still expects to come home to the place of comfort that she remembers. Eventually Haesu discovers that she is more removed from Korea than she ever knew, that she and her traditional Korean mother do not even live by the same “rules of conduct” anymore. Proud, stubborn Haesu has been undoubtedly influenced by living in America, and, though she considers herself “one hundred percent Korean” (300), her life as an immigrant woman has stripped her of an absolute identity. In many ways, she has become a woman without a sure place to stand: “But she realized it wasn’t Mama;
Mama hadn’t changed. . . . It was she. She was out of sorts in her homeland, homesick in Korea without being homesick for America” (125).

Faye knows little of her mother and father’s early immigrant life and next to nothing, even after traveling to Korea with her, of her mother’s life before America. Haesu vows that her children will never have to work to the ringing of a bell in America, as Chun did during his service as a houseboy, and tells them, “You’ll never understand what your Papa and I went through” (190). Faye, for her part, does not understand her mother because she compares her to an idealized version of the typical American mother. At this young age, Faye is not yet acquainted with other Korean American girls, so we can assume she is comparing her mother with mothers of non-Asian acquaintances. She is embarrassed by her mother’s behavior when she accompanies Haesu to find a job: “The women were starting at us again. I went to sit in a chair, away from their prying eyes. Mothers of most of the girls I knew were polite and agreeable but Momma always seemed to get into arguments. I picked up a magazine and flipped the pages. My face felt hot” (193). Faye reveals her conflicted feelings about her mother when she says, “I never knew when to be proud of Momma or when to be embarrassed. I hated having people stare at us and sometimes Momma seemed to go out of her way to make trouble. But the way Mr. Seligman smiled at her told me she had done something right” (194-95). In the public sphere of their lives in America, that is, under the scrutiny of American eyes, Faye is reluctant to identify herself with who she sees her mother as being: an argumentative, demanding, foreign woman. However, she also articulates that she does, at times, feel a
sense of pride in her mother’s ambition and determination, a pride that parallels Haesu’s own characteristic pride in her upper-class Korean roots.

Even before reaching the age in which she becomes fully engulfed in the identity questions typical of adolescence, Faye observes her mother in this pensive, sensitive manner. She eventually comes to notice that her mother, through her traditional Korean value system, does not treat her daughter and her sons equally, another element that complicates their mother-daughter relationship. Faye says, “I wondered how she could justify treating me one way and the boys another” (201-2). This unequal treatment even brings Faye to question her identity as a female. Likely seeing the patriarchal values of traditional Korean culture impose on a woman’s sense of self, Faye asks, “Momma, are you glad you’re a woman?” (202). Though the division along genders lines troubles Faye, this realization is the precursor to something more significant: that she and her mother will have a special relationship because they are both women in a house and a society—both the American and Korean worlds they exist within—where each gender has very different experiences and expectations put upon them.

In A Step from Heaven, Young Ju similarly focuses much of her attention on her father’s patriarchal perspective and derogatory comments, which reveal his negative attitude about women. Uhmma, on the other hand, constantly strives to counteract this negative influence in her daughter’s life. Before they leave Korea, she tells Young Ju: “In Mi Gook, you can grow up to be anything you want. . . . You, little one, are my hope” (17). Young Ju simply relates these details without reflection. At her young age, she is focused on the trauma of having her hair permed by a stranger. However, her mother’s
words are necessary lessons of strength that Uhmma is transmitting to her daughter, and Young Ju will be able to draw on these lessons when she most needs them. As Young Ju grows up, she is able to more fully appreciate the special relationship she shares with her mother: “I am proud of you, Young Ju, Uhmma says, looking down into my eyes. You are a smart girl and someday you will be a smart woman. You just keep studying hard” (45). While Uhmma is stretched thin with her jobs outside the home and responsibilities toward her family, Young Ju articulates the significance of her mother’s designating special time to build up her sense of empowerment as a young, intelligent girl:

Uhmma does not sit too tired to talk on the couch with Joon Ho sleeping in her arms. Tonight she makes me sit next to her and talk about what I would like to be someday. Maybe I can be a doctor or a lawyer, or maybe a professor like some other important Parks. Uhmma tells me stories about the great Parks of our past while Joon Ho sleeps. I listen to Uhmma and think, I cannot be the great son, but I can do important things. (45)

These moments are priceless to Young Ju’s formation of identity. If not for Uhmma’s positive affirmations, Apa’s unequal treatment of his daughter and his son would essentially cripple Young Ju and negate her important role within the family. She wonders, “I don’t understand why Apa thinks boys and girls cannot be treated the same. Why they are so different. There is no dictionary for these kinds of questions” (56). Though Apa’s eventual leaving removes the threat of immediate physical danger from the household, Young Ju continues to struggle with the painful questions of identity that his attitude has brought upon her.
When Chun disappears for good from his family’s life and Faye’s voice takes over the direction of the novel in Part Three, we can here learn the most about the mother-daughter relationship in *Clay Walls*. Faye’s narration indeed reveals her struggle with evolving, often ambivalent feelings toward her mother. The gap between mother and daughter in *Clay Walls* is more than simply generational. They are also set apart linguistically: Haesu speaks more naturally in Korean while Faye articulates herself most comfortably in English. The language gap extends to a cultural one. While Haesu thinks of herself as simply ‘100 percent Korean,’ Faye yearns to identify with both her American peers and her Korean American friends. Faye also seems to long for a stronger emotional connection to her mother, but it is difficult for Haesu to connect with her daughter while she is bound to the table, working almost nonstop embroidering handkerchiefs to support the family in Chun’s absence. In their own small ways, however, Haesu and Faye begin to build an important bond. Shouting instructions to Faye from the table as she sews, Haesu teaches her daughter how to cook rice, which is a means for them to bond in a ritual of Korean culture. Though initially hesitant, Faye develops an instinct for cooking the rice: “I began to cook the rice every night and soon discovered that the first joint of my forefinger measured the right amount of water. The boys no longer complained” (196). In a way her brothers cannot, Faye bonds with her mother over this task. That Haesu passes down the method of preparing such a staple of their diet to her daughter speaks of her love for Faye and her desire to see her become a valued woman in the home, even if their relationship does not seem to have the warmth that Faye observes between other mothers and daughters.
Characteristic of the differing nature of the mother-daughter relationships in the two novels, Haesu is more controlling as she teaches Faye how to prepare the rice, while Uhmma is more nurturing of her daughter. In *A Step from Heaven*, Uhmma does not literally teach her daughter how to cook rice; rather, Young Ju realizes she has learned to do so simply by observing her mother over the years:

I am on my break, Uhmma says and comes over to stand beside me. She watches me clean the rice. My hands shake a little from having her observe me so closely.

When did you learn how to make the rice? she asks.

I shrug and pour out the milky water. I have watched you enough times, I say.

I suppose that was how I learned, she says. Watching my uhmma. (142)

In this scene we observe the ritual of cooking rice again serving as an important component of the mother-daughter relationship. As it was passed from her mother, Uhmma continues the cycle of such a bond among Korean women by acknowledging her daughter’s efforts at the task: “You have done a good job making the rice, Young Ju, Uhmma says” (142).

This key moment between mother and daughter in *A Step from Heaven*, in a chapter aptly titled “Seeds of Life,” serves as the moment of crisis for their fractured relationship. Because Uhmma was so angry with Young Ju for having Apa arrested, their mother-daughter relationship seems to have been almost irreparably damaged. However, we can see the ritual of preparing the rice become a moment of healing between Young
Ju and Uhmma. As Uhmma praises her for making the rice, Young Ju articulates the pain that surfaces: “I turn my face away from her. Blink rapidly at the far wall to keep my tears from spilling over. It has been a long time since she has spoken to me” (142). Because of their strong bond and Uhmma’s fierce love for her daughter, their relationship surfaces above the family’s troubles as an element of hope. Uhmma says to her daughter, “Please try to understand, Young Ju. These last few months have been difficult. I did not have the right words for you until today. I said things that are not true. I blamed you for my mistake. . . . I blamed you for trying to save me” (143). Mother and daughter together work to repair the relationship that Apa’s actions almost cost them.

For Young Ju, those actions she took to save herself and her mother from Apa’s vicious beating is a key moment in her identity formation and for her developing relationship with her mother. Rather than simply accepting what Uhmma tells her, that she can have a better life but her mother cannot, Young Ju makes a better life for both of them. She recognizes that their relationship has become somewhat of a partnership. As her mother says to Young Ju, “You must have grown when I was not looking” (129). Indeed, though Young Ju has grown into a young woman capable of showing strength during difficult times, the important messages Uhmma has been persistently transmitting to her are the makings of this strength.

Perhaps Faye would view Young Ju’s mother as the type of mother she wishes, at those times of insecurity and embarrassment, that she had to soothe and strengthen her. Though Haesu may not contribute to her daughter’s sense of identity in quite the same way, Faye and her mother have the makings of a strong mother-daughter bond.
Eventually, the connection with her mother that Faye yearns for solidifies through their rituals. As Faye cooks the rice every evening, Haesu sits at the dining table and sews, telling her daughter about her life before coming to America: “While the rice steamed, I visited with Momma. I learned about the things she did when she was a young girl in Korea: about her having to walk through forests where tigers lived, about her love for roast corn in the fall and roast chestnuts in the winter. She filled my imagination with her remembrances until her memories became mine” (196). As Faye comes to understand and articulate something of what her mother lost in leaving Korea, they are together making steps toward understanding each other’s identities.

However, Faye’s identity—with both the Korean and American components—is a precarious one, and this makes her need for a relationship with her mother even stronger. Haesu forbids Faye from having friends from Japanese families because of what Japan has done to the Korean people, but Faye has secretly become close to Jane Nagano, a Japanese American girl from school. When she eventually reveals her secret to her mother, their differing perspectives clash, but Haesu is able to set aside her cultural pride and attempt to understand her daughter’s feelings. Faye relates, “When she caught up with me, I blurted out, ‘I haven’t got anyone. You’re always at that stupid table.’ I couldn’t stop myself. ‘The boys are always out together. Papa’s gone and I don’t have anyone’ ” (211-12). Haesu responds by saying, “I’m sorry you’re so miserable” (212). Haesu attempts a compromise, showing her growth as a result of her relationship with her daughter, by telling Faye she can play with Jane at the Naganos’ house but will not be allowed to miss dinner with her own family. We can see Haesu trying to understand
Faye’s need for a unique identity, separate from her ‘100 percent Korean’ mother, that reconciles the Korean and American sides of Faye’s self. Faye feels a need to seek her own identity outside of the home that is ruled by a traditional Korean mother, but her bond with her mother is instinctive, so they are able to draw on their love for one another in order to work through such difficulties.

Faye, at times, sees her largest obstacle as being a mother who simply does not understand what it is like to be an American-born girl living a dual life in Korean and American worlds. However, Faye’s burgeoning identity within her home and with her mother is more secure and contrasts with the insecurity she feels as a result of difference and discrimination in the outside world. She describes how others see her:

I wasn’t like other American girls. No one at school spoke to me or behaved towards me as if I were like any American girl. Most of them were nice enough. I even considered Ruth Johnson one of my best friends until she told me, “You know, Faye, I don’t think of you as being Korean anymore,” as if there was something wrong with being Korean. We never double dated. She went to school dances but I was never asked. (231)

Though Faye longs for a connection with her peers that is not conducted on the lines of her ethnicity, she has also inherited a measure of her mother’s pride and is troubled by others’ prejudices. We can see that she also wants to be initiated into the rituals of a young American womanhood. While others need to see her as Korean or not Korean, Faye knows her identity is much more complicated. When she visits the Nagano family, her narration reveals that she is continually riddled by questions concerning how others
see her. She watches Jane’s sister Margaret recite a poem that is unfamiliar to her, and her naïve reaction opens her up to such questions:

“Oh, Margaret. That was nice,” I said. “Did you write it?”

She laughed. “I wish I had. It’s from *The Grass*, by Walt Whitman.”

Mrs. Nagano said something to Mr. Nagano. I recognized the word “Chosen-jin” and knew it was about me. I felt ill at ease. Was it about my ignorance of Walt Whitman? I wondered, or about the way I laughed, or the way I don’t drink Japanese green tea? Was it about my being Korean?

(216)

As an adolescent so vulnerable to others’ perceptions of her, Faye’s sense of self is shaken by interactions such as these.

The nature of Faye’s conflicted feelings is revealed when Mr. Nagano uses a word that triggers a particular reaction in Faye: “The word ‘duplicity’ opened a crack in my memory. I had tried desperately to forget a secret, tried so hard that I could never forget. I remember Captain Yamamoto of the Taiyo Maru” (216). This man Faye remembers had been the captain of their ship on the passage to Korea years earlier. Wanting certain advantages that came with being Japanese, the Korean-born Yamamoto had posed, quite convincingy, as a Japanese man until he was revealed as a traitor and killed. The “crack” in her memory that the idea of duplicity opens represents a fissure within Faye’s sense of self, her own measure of duplicity with which she has to live in being a second-generation Korean immigrant. The lines between the internal forces—from within her
home and her own mind—and the external forces that shape her identity become blurred as she internalizes everything in an attempt to define herself.

For Faye and Young Ju both, identity issues concerning appearance color their struggles as young Korean American women. Though her delicate sense of identity is mostly shaken by her father, Young Ju takes note of how others perceive her and her family because of their appearance: “All of us in my family look like tangerines next to oranges” (54). In a time of widespread ignorance, Faye endures the common experience of being confused with other types of ‘Orientals.’ A group of boys call her “China girl” (197), and, following the Pearl Harbor bombing, Faye and her friends are called “stinkin’ Japs” and “fuckin’ yellow monkeys” (260), even though they support the United States’ war efforts and oppose the Japanese. In an attempt to look more American for the American man she falls in love with, Haesu’s friend Clara has plastic surgery that permanently disfigures her face, which Faye describes:

[T]he veil fell away from her face. I saw her gray complexion. She had meant to have it whitened, but having her skin peeled had left it looking dead. Above her high cheekbones, her eyes bulged as if she were frightened. The operation was to make them larger. Momma had told me that Aunt Clara could not fully close her eyes anymore, not even when she slept. I kissed her cheek through the veil and vowed I would never fall in love with the wrong man. (225)

Though Faye can articulate her disgust at the result of trying to please such a man, she still struggles with her own concept of ideal beauty and wants to be considered attractive
by American standards. She says, “I wanted to be the kind of girl boys liked to be with so, while watching movies, I studied the way Hollywood stars walked and talked. I thumbed through magazines to see how starlets fixed their hair and dressed” (231). Faye may never allow herself to go to the extreme of plastic surgery, but we can still see the need for her to have a strong, consistent female figure in her life to counteract her insecurity and guide her toward self-confidence.

Ultimately, Faye is unable to shape her identity until she comes to understand who her mother is and the significance of that understanding in the fabric of her own identity. As she hears her mother’s stories, she learns about Haesu’s happy times as a young girl in an idyllic Korea of the past. However, Faye cannot come to a full understanding of who her mother is and how her mother’s identity informs her own identity until she also understands Haesu’s pain. And, in the meantime, when Faye is unable to do so herself, Haesu will fight for her daughter to have a strong sense of self amid the myriad of influences she encounters. Haesu tells Faye, “You are not like other American girls. If you try to be like them, you will be nothing special” (231). Eventually, Faye will find she no longer needs to look outside of herself, her home, and her mother to identify who she is.

In the final chapters of A Step from Heaven, Young Ju’s narration reveals that her identity is, too, still developing as Faye’s is. She wonders about leaving for college: “What if I don’t like it at college? What if I stand out like an alien? What if I am disappointed?” (146). Though Young Ju continues to worry about such things as looking different, Uhmma has taught her daughter the self-respect that leads Young Ju to seek a
life for herself that is not disappointing, as their early lives had been in America with Apa’s negativity and abuse darkening the home. Young Ju “never learned to read or write Korean,” so she brings the moving boxes with Korean writing “to Uhmma for deciphering” (146) as they unpack in their new home in the weeks before Young Ju leaves for college. Though she may not be fluent in her mother’s language, Young Ju recognizes the importance of her mother as one who can help her ‘decipher’ her identity as a Korean American woman. Her identity is incomplete without her mother, so Young Ju, too, values the photos and stories from Uhmma’s life in Korea that are contained within these boxes. Young Ju says, “I realize that a whole part of my history has been missing” (147). The exchange, however, is mutual between mother and daughter. Uhmma had been unable to look at these photos for the pain of her homesickness, but transmitting the memories to a daughter who values them makes such remembrance bearable. Uhmma and Young Ju, through the reclaiming of the photos, also complete the taking back of their identities from Apa’s abuse. They are now secure enough in their identities as strong women to deal with memories of Apa, knowing that his moods and abuse no longer rule the home or their lives. Mother and daughter have built a life together within the turmoil of an abusive home and a prejudiced world, which is symbolized by the house they choose together. Young Ju says, “I shield my eyes from the bright sun and turn to look at the house we can finally call home. It’s strange how much this home resembles the one in Korea. Same squat, square shape and low roof, like a sitting hen ready to lay. I suppose that was why Uhmma and I knew this would be the one from the moment we saw it” (144). Young Ju honors her mother and the motherland part
of her identity just in the simple act of remembering their home in Korea. Mother and
daughter together have an appreciation for the first home they shared and incorporate this
sense of who they are into their new home.

The family’s home in *Clay Walls* seems haunted by Haesu’s loss of her homeland,
specifically the idealized Korea of her youth. The piece of land she owns back in
Qwaksan is never far from her mind, and her holding on to it becomes a symbol of the
pride in cultural values and self-respect she wants her children to inherit from her.
However, it is difficult for the children to understand why she doesn’t sell it when they
are struggling for money:

> She was thinking about the land again. Whenever she needed money, she
> thought of it. But she never wanted money badly enough to sell her land.
> “Someday you children will inherit it all. It belongs to our family. If I
> were to sell it, the money would soon be gone and we would have
> nothing,” she would say. The name of the town where the land was
> located made us laugh. John and I would waddle around like ducks as we
> chanted. “Qwaksan, Qwaksan, Qwaksan.” (221)

At their young ages, the children do not share their mother’s values and nearly mock her
for what seems to them a waste of money. Indeed, Haesu herself states that “Her heritage
was an anachronism in the United States” (100). For years, Faye does not understand, and
she and Haesu clash over it; “ ‘Then sell the land,’ I said. ‘What’s the point of hanging on
to it?’ A fire lit in her eyes when she looked at me. ‘I hope that someday you will know
why I keep the land. Until you do, don’t talk to me about it’ ” (244). Faye continues to
puzzle over it, repeating the name like a mantra, “Qwaksan. Qwaksan. Why won’t she sell the land?” (244). For Faye, Qwaksan becomes a puzzle for her to solve concerning her mother’s identity.

   Eventually, Faye begins to work through the answers she is looking for about her mother simply by articulating that she indeed values the Korean aspect of her heritage. When Faye and her boyfriend Willie are talking about dancing, Haesu comments, “American music doesn’t make me feel like dancing. Korean music makes me feel like dancing. It’s in my blood” (278). She laments that Willie doesn’t feel the same way. Faye, however, subtly but powerfully speaks to her dual identity, one through which she has learned to value her mother’s culture: “She [Haesu] smiled when I said, ‘I feel like dancing when I hear Korean music, only I don’t know how’ ” (278). To Faye, defining herself as a Korean woman may not come as naturally as it does for her mother, but, as she grows up, Faye is instinctually finding a place for Haesu and what Haesu values within her own identity. Faye even comes to remember some of her life during the visit to Korea as a very young girl. When speaking with a young Korean American man named Dan, she says,

   “It sounds as cold as Sunchoun. . . . Sunchoun, Korea. My family went there when I was a little girl. Froze my toes walking to school one morning.” I was surprised I still remembered. . . . “But oh! It was painful. My teacher carried me to the stove and rubbed my feet until I was able to feel my toes again.” The memory of it became more vivid. I was grateful I had sworn never to forget my teacher. (291)
Through this memory, Faye is not just remembering a teacher; she is honoring her mother and her mother’s history. This stands in sharp contrast to the reaction of her Korean American friend Alice when Dan asks her about going to Korea: “Who me? . . . It’s too primitive. Outhouses and dirt floors and flies. No, thank you” (292).

Finally, with this memory of Korea opening a wider place for Faye to consider who her mother really is and what she means in Faye’s own life, Faye can appreciate the meaning of the land. When Korea is divided along the 38th parallel after World War II ends, Qwaksan is lost as part of North Korean territory. Haesu tells Faye, “My land in Qwaksan is gone” (300). Faye articulates her feelings of loss on her mother’s behalf:

Qwaksan was gone and there was no money to show for it. The land was Momma’s only holding in her homeland and it had been taken away from her; her only holding in the world. Suddenly, I felt as if I had been stamped with stupidity. That was what I was supposed to understand. She had hung onto Qwaksan for as long as she could. I wanted to cry. (300)

It is noteworthy that Faye grieves for the land because she never appreciated the meaning of it and took her mother’s strength for granted. Haesu, on the other hand, through this exchange, can cast off the idealized Korea that haunts her and recognize the Korea that she keeps alive within her and has passed on to her daughter: “‘Gosh, Momma, being one hundred percent Korean isn’t easy,’ I said. She smiled as she bit off the thread. ‘You’re not a baby anymore,’ she said” (301). As Uhmma recognizes the partnership she shares with her own strong daughter, Haesu’s simple declaration here shows her acknowledgement that Faye is becoming her own strong woman. Indeed, Faye is no
longer a ‘baby’ but is slowly becoming the kind of woman her mother had observed in Korea: “Korean women are strong. Haesu thought, their steps are energetic and sure” (100).

Undoubtedly, the mothers of both novels, too, grow from interacting with their daughters. Uhmma is able to reconcile her conflicted identity through seeing the success of her strong, intelligent Korean American daughter who is navigating her own complicated identity day after day. Uhmma learns that she can indeed have a life that is better than abuse and belittlement; it is not just a dream for her to pass on to her daughter. This may be her way of accepting the American side of herself, the strong woman who does not allow herself to be controlled by patriarchal values or crippled when the patriarchal head of the family disappears. She has learned how to be the “American” single mother, providing both financially and emotionally for her children. Haesu has become that single mother figure as well, doing painstaking work despite being raised as a yangban who is never supposed to work. Despite her pride, she shows her widening cultural perspective through her attempts to understand Faye, and she acknowledges her children’s difficult position in contrast to her own self-assured identity. She tells Faye, “It’s hard to be Korean living in the United States. Especially for you children. For me, it’s not so hard. I know I’m one hundred percent Korean” (300). Though she doesn’t employ the exact terminology used in immigrant literary theory, Haesu has identified the complexities that exist for her children, who cannot call themselves “one hundred percent” of any one culture. She has allowed their experiences to inform her own sense of what a mother needs to be for her children.
Clay Walls literally ends with Faye opening a letter from Dan in anticipation of their courtship. Faye says, “I took a deep breath then tore open the envelope” (301). However, Faye and Haesu’s relationship remains significant even here because Faye has met and chosen Dan as someone who appreciates his Korean heritage as she does. Haesu approves of Dan, but Faye connects with him for different reasons. She tells him, “I haven’t found a book yet written about the people I know” (297). Faye has found someone who allows her to acknowledge her complicated identity, with whom she can navigate it. She no longer seeks to get away from her mother and to model herself after what she sees in the outside world. Rather, she is able to find a place for both her mother and herself within her identity. Though the incorporation is complex and she will undoubtedly continue to grow and shape her sense of self, Faye is finding space for her mother’s values and history within her own distinct Korean American identity.

A Step from Heaven too ends with a closing stroke seeming to point away from the mother-daughter relationship. Young Ju learns that in her very first memory, she was being held in the waves by her father. She is surprised and touched, recognizing, as her mother says, “He was a different man back then” (149). She seems equipped, with her mother’s help, to view Apa with more sympathetic eyes, as a troubled man rather than a villainous one. However, the novel ends with an epilogue that points back to the mother-daughter relationship. Here Young Ju and her mother walk hand-in-hand, symbolic of the partnership of love and trust they have come to achieve. Young Ju is able to articulate the valuable person her mother is in her life, indeed, the most valuable, by identifying the history contained in her hands: “I trace a set of tiny lines etched along her thumb. They
speak of Uhmma’s early years gathering and drying fish along the Korean coastline. I follow another path and find a deep groove at the base of her pointer finger. Immediately, I smell the smoky kitchen of the steak house crowded with visitors just pulling off the I-5 for dinner” (153). Though they inform each other’s identities, Uhmma and Young Ju ultimately shape their own separate identities. Young Ju tells her mother, “I wish I could erase these scars for you” (153). Then, “Uhmma gently slips her hands from mine. She stares for a moment at her callused skin and then says firmly, These are my hands, Young Ju” (153-54). This is a puzzling but ultimately satisfying moment between mother and daughter. Perhaps Uhmma does not define herself as a scarred person. Undoubtedly, she wants to bestow on Young Ju the power to define herself on her own terms. Rather than breeding a relationship of dependence on one another, Young Ju and her mother can carry themselves, though they may, at times, look to each other for encouragement.

The mother-daughter relationships of both novels exhibit a fierce love that helps the mothers and daughters alike deal with their complicated identities. In *A Step from Heaven*’s final chapter, it seems likely that even Young Ju’s brother Joon may recover from his disconnectedness because of the loving home that his sister and mother have built around him. As Young Ju and her mother reconcile after Apa’s return to Korea, Young Ju is able to let herself fully trust her mother, all of the walls between them having been broken down by love and their joint efforts at understanding one another. We see such a moment showcased when mother and daughter finally repair their damaged relationship over the ritual of the rice: “Uhmma smooths my forehead, my cheeks. Tucks my hair behind my ears like she used to do when I was young. I put my arms around her
and rest my head on her shoulders. She murmurs, You are my strong girl” (143). Faye identifies a similar moment of love that only she and her mother can share through the passing of the rice preparation:

At dinner, Harold and John complained that the rice was too dry. Momma looked at me and said, “It’s not bad for the first try, baby.” She said ‘baby’ the way Koreans say, nae dari, tenderly and filled with love. She once told me there was no English translation for nae dari but that ‘my precious child’ or ‘my darling’ was close. I liked Momma’s way of saying ‘baby’ best. (196)

Though Faye, at times, articulates the loss she feels with her father’s leaving and his eventual death, there is no substitute for her relationship with her mother, a woman to whom she can look for a model of strength and self-confidence in a world not perfectly suited for those carrying the burden of a split identity. Both Faye and Young Ju, however, have learned how to carry such burdens with hope as they look to their mothers.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.

—Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake

Lahiri’s metaphor encapsulates many of the experiences of the Korean American families of Clay Walls and A Step from Heaven, from changing family relationships and issues of language to the overall challenge of navigating a new set of identity-related complications. Appropriately so, the image is one of pregnancy, as the female figures in both novels are the ones who have the strength to carry such burdens, finding partnership and empowerment through the mother-daughter bond. Haesu and Uhmma, through their recognition of their daughters as strong, grown women, reconcile themselves with the painful loss of their homeland. They appreciate what their daughters have become in this new homeland of America —young women who find inherent value in each side of their identity and, indeed, within themselves—which undoubtedly validates all of the sacrifices related to the mothers’ uprooting and immigration.

The identity crises these daughters face are amplified by the pangs of adolescence. However, unlike their male siblings in the novels, who do not show themselves to be on much better paths than their troubled fathers, Faye and Young Ju find their strong voices through the narration of their adolescent thoughts and struggles. This
narration is a place where they can work through their concerns over who they are. As Faye and Young Ju are children of two cultures and two languages, such potent, empowering articulation of their most joyful and painful experiences alike frees them from the confines of language and expectations of one culture or another. Moreover, before either girl can even articulate its significance, the reader can see the mother-daughter relationship emerging with all its strength, subtlety, and love.

Through the narrative perspectives of Faye and Young Ju, the relationship between mother and daughter is pushed to the center of the novels and the core of the family. Though it is an interesting starting point to recognize that the shifting family roles in the novels fit a sociological pattern for Korean American immigrant families, I am more concerned with the exploration of identity that occurs within these novels because they are realistic depictions of immigrant stories. As seen through the eyes of these young girls, the stories become even more introspective, touching, and delicate. The acute concern over appearance specifically is only possible because these girls consider themselves to look so different and are viewed, by society at large, as perpetually foreign-looking. To the girls’ American acquaintances, the Korean side of their identities is one that needs to be absorbed or normalized into an “American” persona in order for Faye and Young Ju to be treated the way they want by their peers. Inevitably, they discover that they cannot find a nurturing place for their raw, evolving, conflicted identities among their peers.

While these daughters may always wonder over the question of who they are because of their particularly difficult roles as women with dual identities—a Korean side
and an American one—they have found voices to navigate them through such questions. These voices are seasoned and empowered by their mothers as strong, determined women. As vital to the daughter’s sense of self, she must articulate—directly or indirectly—the significance of the mother-daughter relationship in order to identify her unique position and opportunity to essentially perpetuate her mother’s existence as a strong Korean immigrant woman through her own finding of identity.

Although I chose not to apply feminist theory to this study of Clay Walls and A Step from Heaven, my concern over the significance of the female adolescent narration and the mother-daughter relationships would no doubt have been fruitful ground for such an approach. I feel my study is most nested within the field of immigrant literature. Regardless of ethnicity—as seen in the Review of the Literature—identity-related concerns are present in any works that can be placed within the immigrant literature category. William Boelhower’s theories present a universal starting point for studies of immigrant literature, even when applied to individuals outside the European immigrant pool he considered in his selected works. However, there is much yet to explore within the field of immigrant literature concerning individual and communal issues of identity. As Boelhower describes, the expectations of an “American dream” and the reality of life in America inevitably clash, but so too the dual sides of an immigrant’s identity, especially for those of the 1.5 or second generation, unforgivingly pull at his or her sense of self.

An adolescent of such circumstances is especially vulnerable to this assault on his identity, regardless of gender, and the two novels show this vulnerability through their
depictions of Faye, Young Ju, and their male siblings. In fact, *A Step from Heaven* is specifically marketed as reading for young adults, although it is undoubtedly valuable reading outside its category. Na’s work fills a need for realism within multicultural literature for young adults, particularly because it does not become a simple assimilation story as the “happy ending” for Young Ju. More such important texts—and the scholarly consideration of them—are needed within the young adult category and within the classroom.

Though *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven* both showcase strong young women who narrate themselves through a precarious existence, a young man in similar circumstances would have no less fuel for narrating and navigating his own difficult dual identity. For instance, a novel such as *Native Speaker*, by male Korean American author Chang-rae Lee, would serve as a place to undertake such a study of immigrant identity concerns as related to the father-son relationship. This novel would also allow a space to more fully explore the concerns of language within an immigrant identity, as I was able to look at in small part within *Clay Walls* and *A Step from Heaven*.

A more in-depth study of either novel individually or both together could be undertaken using the husband and father figure as the focus. Both Chun and Mr. Park married a woman of a rich family. We are often reminded of Haesu’s *yangban* class, and Uhmma too reveals to Young Ju at the end of the novel that she was from a rich family and that this created resentment in Apa. While Chun and Mr. Park are counterparts as husbands and fathers who feel perpetually inadequate, Haesu and Mr. Park are counterparts in their characteristic pride. This leads to a question for further study: How
does Mr. Park’s pride become his downfall while Haesu’s drives her to successfully provide for her family as a single mother? Perhaps Mr. Park’s pride is a very individual holding that breeds selfishness, while Haesu’s pride is a cultural heritage that she must pass on to her children as her yangban descendants. Though my angle into the two novels was through the female characters, I feel the male characters too are complex, sympathetic, and rich for analysis of immigrant identity concerns.

My choice of these two works is rooted in the novels’ commonalities, specifically the female adolescent narrators and the strong mother figures, but their most basic point in common is Korea as the homeland. As true to Boelhower’s patterns, the Park family undoubtedly idealizes America, viewing it as a place so different and with so much hope that it can solve their deeply rooted problems. Eventually, the reality of an American life of struggle and poverty causes Mr. Park to idealize his Korean culture. He attempts to pound his idea of Korean manliness into his son, berates his daughter for becoming too American, and eventually abandons the task of being an immigrant in America altogether to return to Korea. In *Clay Walls*, Haesu yearns for the Korea of her youth, even when she knows it has essentially been destroyed by Japanese occupation. In her is most evident the fierce love for one’s place of birth, one’s motherland, one’s homeland. The political underpinnings of *Clay Walls* are rich for analysis, and through Haesu, we can see how much has truly been lost to the occupation, war, and greed that has ravaged Korea in the twentieth century. Though a place—Korea—is very much at the heart of the strong mother figures in both novels, they, alongside their daughters, are able to create a space for themselves to live a life without concern over borders.


