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**Rental Refuge, Fractured Selves: Anxiety, Assimilation and Violence in Weike Wang's Rental House**Ex. Student M.A. English- Department of English & Other Foreign Languages,  
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**Abstract:** *Historically, humans have traveled to different places for various reasons, such as trade, exploration, conquest, and survival, which evolved into large-scale migration driven by the pursuit of better opportunities and livelihoods. As Min Zhou notes, many early and contemporary Asian immigrants were drawn to the United States as “a land of labor opportunities and socioeconomic mobility” (3-4), even if they confronted systemic barriers upon arrival. Immigrants seek economic stability, educational advancement, and prosperity for themselves and their families in host nations like the United States. Yet, this pursuit of prosperity often leads to challenges for immigrants in the host land, including isolation, alienation, emotional stress, racism, and the “anxiety of being caught between two cultures.” At the same time, host countries often perceive immigrants as threats, burdens, welfare seekers, and competitors for scarce resources, leaving them with an acculturative stress where they grapple with assimilating into the host society while clinging to homeland ties.*

**Key words:** Rental Refuge, Fractured Selves, Anxiety, Assimilation, Violence, Rental House, the host society.

Weike Wang, a well-known Chinese-American novelist, vividly illustrates these same tensions in her novel *Rental House* (2024), through Keru and Nate, an interracial couple whose changing rental properties symbolize that assimilation is not a complete and painless process. This paper, therefore, explores how immigrants and their descendants strive for assimilation in the hostland through various deliberate and often exhausting strategies such as embracing the dominant culture, performing the model-minority myth, and making personal sacrifices to secure economic stability and social acceptability. However, these strategies lead to the gradual disintegration of their traditional value systems, a continuous feeling of being outsiders even within their families, and the quiet alienation that surface when cultural expectations clash across generations and racial lines, which Keru's character demonstrates clearly.

Keru, a second-generation Chinese American who “left China as a youth” (Wang 3), lives with her white husband, Nate, and their sheepdog Mantou in a rental apartment in Manhattan. She faces “tremendous psychological pressure to maintain the shining image of overachievers,” a burden common among children of Asian immigrants whose parents believe financial stability, self-reliance, and hard work are prerequisites for survival and acceptability (Zhitong 534). Her pursuit of a high-earning consulting career, using her savings to pay off Nate's debt, and renting elite Cape Cod mansions, represents deliberate strategies to “prove her worth” in exclusionary American spaces, mirroring her parents' obsessive emphasis on achievement and financial stability. This professional ambition highlights the model minority myth, where “Asian Americans are stereotyped as academically and economically more successful than other racial minority groups due to their effort, values, hard work, and perseverance and belief in American meritocracy” (Poon et al. 472). Yet, these efforts to achieve socio-economic stability leave her feeling trapped between parental obedience and expectations, unraveling the myth's limitations in addressing the deep emotional and cultural costs of assimilation.

Keru's parents define achievement through mandatory suffering, as her mother declares, “Ease is an illusion...Nothing worth achieving can or should be easy...to suffer is to strive” (Wang 38). For her father, any shortcut is defeat, as he says, “to use a dishwasher is to admit defeat” (Wang 9). For them, their culture teaches them to work hard and suffer. Her nature changes completely around them, as Nate notes, “To be with his in-laws was to watch his wife turn into someone else...she absorbed their anxieties and complaints, mirrored their verbal tics, and regressed to a childlike state” (Wang 40-41). Their strict values compel Keru to hide her vulnerabilities, and feelings, and to remain silent during her parents' scolding. This silence shows that her sense of duty to her parents is stronger than her own desires, as “the three of them had journeyed through something together, and for many years...they were her only home” (Wang 28). Her parents' understanding of stability reveals their struggle to integrate into American culture while refusing to abandon Chinese traditions.

Despite choosing to live in America, Keru's parents remain deeply connected to their Chinese culture and homeland. They settled in rural Minnesota, which geographically resembles the flat farmland of their hometown in China. While appreciating the opportunities available there, they remain conscious that America is not entirely safe for Asians due to the frequent reports of violent crimes and murder targeting Asians, such as the “Chinatown murder” where an Asian woman was “followed...stabbed forty times,”



which reinforces their belief that even full assimilation offers no real protection (Wang 29). Keru endures racial slurs, such as being called “chinks” by her classmates, and even her father’s anxiety about being stereotyped is clearly seen when he warns Keru that “too many Asians in an area was not ideal, and could only draw dissent or hate from the locals, as in Look, here comes another overqualified Asian to steal a specialized job that no one really wants” (Wang 33-34), underscoring how this continual hostility makes immigrants feel more strongly connected to their homeland rather than the hostland.

This persistent racial hostility exposes the failure of the “melting pot” ideal, which assumes a smooth blending of immigrant identities into a unified American culture, yet in reality, ethnicity proves far more resilient and persistent. As Werner Sollors argues, the American promise of cultural fusion via “consent” (voluntary adoption of new norms) repeatedly clashes with “descent” (inherited ethnic ties), making ethnic resilience far more enduring than assimilationist narratives suggest (6-8). This retention of ethnicity is clearly visible in how Keru and her parents choose to speak only Chinese when they are together, using language as a powerful anchor of their identity. As Donghui Zhang argues, Chinese immigrant families prioritize “ethnic language maintenance” through familial interactions to foster “emotional support” and view it as a “source of ethnic pride” (79-80). Similarly, the European couple that Keru and Nate encounter during their vacation, openly embrace and transmit their European cultural heritage in their child, who fluently navigates Romanian, Dutch, and English, providing a source of parental pride for them.

However, these ethnic preservation practices often create a profound sense of mutual otherness, even within the family itself. Nate experiences intense alienation from Keru’s Chinese-only conversations, as Wang writes, “Keru’s parents spoke Chinese around Nate...he had no idea what was going on” (Wang 5), leaving him silent during family interactions. Although he has been learning Chinese to integrate into their family, he still feels like an outsider, noting that “his in-laws did not see him as a real son” (Wang 40), mirroring immigrants’ exclusionary treatment and feeling of otherness. Keru feels similar alienation from Nate’s mother when she repeatedly probes, “What kind of immigrants are they...Are they Christians? Do they believe in God? Did they enter the country the right way? Are her parents citizens? Is Keru a citizen?” (Wang 12). Although she claims to love Keru, an unspoken otherness persists between them, revealing how cultural differences keep them emotionally estranged.

This estrangement seeps into the marriage itself, turning their interracial union into another site of assimilation struggle. Keru destabilizes the egalitarian partnership Nate envisioned by prioritizing financial success and career mobility over domestic rootedness, leaving him feeling jealous, emasculated, and peripheral. This power imbalance becomes explicit when Keru’s mother advises her to “use him as a shield” (Wang 27), framing him as a tool for Keru’s social integration. Their marriage replicates the very othering they face from their in-laws. This internal othering escalates when family expectations shift from marriage to reproduction, exposing children as the ultimate test of assimilation. Keru’s mother and mother-in-law both express a strong desire to become grandparents, emphasizing children as sources of expanded love and stronger family bonds. Though the burden disproportionately falls on Keru, since women are culturally positioned as “primary lineage bearers,” obligated to produce the next generation as an act of family duty and cultural continuity. For Keru’s parents, a child symbolizes profound assimilation, as “the first of her lineage in America,” the child would gain automatic U.S. citizenship and a sense of rootedness denied to immigrants, positioning the firstborn as a “cultural broker” who permanently bridges Chinese heritage and American belonging (Wadley, pars. 5-7).

As an only child, Keru experiences this pressure even more acutely. Although she and Nate deliberately chose not to have children to maintain financial stability and freedom in their lives, they face constant pressure to reconsider their decision. When Elena and Mircea, the European couple, label them “DINK ...Double income, no kids couple” (Wang 154), they speculate that Keru’s childlessness stems from not wanting her offspring to endure the “anxiety of caught in-betweenness,” and becoming “stubborn and violent” due to the accumulated cultural strain. This triggers Keru’s memories of frustration and social isolation when excluded from gatherings or conversations around children, which makes her feel like an outsider in parent-centric circles. Deep down, Keru fears transmitting her own struggles with identity and non-belonging dilemmas to her child, as mixed-race children facing cultural tensions often exhibit heightened aggression and behavioral issues due to identity conflicts and acculturative stress (Schwarz, pars. 1-3).

However, Keru’s fear is not abstract, as she herself displays all the traits she dreads passing on, such as her dominant, aggressive, and occasionally violent behavior. Her outbursts, such as hurling a rock at a white woman on the beach, flinging a flaming patriotic log through the screen door, and impulsively



throwing her phone in annoyance, reflect Keru's deep-seated frustrations that stem from social isolation, intense family pressures, identity crisis, and moral dilemmas. Her aggression serves as an outlet for the cumulative psychological toll of navigating the demand to constantly prove her worth, while trying to preserve her cultural identity in America. Yet, amid these eruptions, Keru desperately yearns for stability through familial support and togetherness.

Ultimately, Wang employs Keru's unresolved yearning for stability in the novel's recurring rental properties, as spaces that are neither fully "home" nor entirely foreign, which embody the incomplete and often painful nature of assimilation. Keru and Nate's continuous displacement from Manhattan apartment to Cape Cod cottage to Catskills compound mirrors their fractured identities, transforming these spaces into microcosms where cultural clashes, generational expectations, and personal anxieties surface most sharply. Keru's rebellion against the hybrid pressures of her in-between life, and her deep craving for the "together we suffer" solidarity that her parents modeled, reveals a lingering hope that these sites of "borrowed stability" might evolve into a genuine communal refuge.

Thus, this paper delves into how Weike Wang's *Rental House* (2024) renders assimilation as an unending process of loss and adaptation. The novel, through Keru's model-minority striving, violent rebellions, and yearning for fractured togetherness in transient rentals, traces how second-generation immigrants inhabit assimilation as a perpetual negotiation. Eventually, *Rental House* offers a nuanced critique of the American promise of belonging, revealing the enduring psychic costs of migration even across generations.

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