



Diasporic and Colonization elements in Grace. D. Li's writings with reference to "Portrait of a thief"

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Abstract

Grace D. Li grew up in Pearland, Texas, and is a graduate of Duke University, where she studied biology and creative writing. She is a former New York City high school teacher and currently attends medical school at Stanford University. *Portrait of a Thief*, a lush, lyrical heist novel inspired by the true story of Chinese art vanishing from Western museums; about diaspora, the colonization of art, and the complexity of the Chinese American identity. History is told by the conquerors. Across the Western world, museums display the spoils of war, of conquest, of colonialism: priceless pieces of art looted from other countries, kept even now. *Portrait of a Thief* perfectly executed heist that reminds us why we love to pair art and crime. It is a confident debut for Grace D. Li, whose writing shows great knowledge and enthusiasm. A compelling portrait of the Chinese diaspora experience that doesn't quite land as either literary fiction or thriller. It is a debut novel calls out institutionalized imperialism in the Western world. While working at Harvard's Sackler Museum, Will Chen, a senior majoring in art history, witnesses a robbery of Chinese art. He quickly finds himself caught up in the investigation. The problem: He's actually running the heist. Will and four other Chinese American college students—Will's sister and several acquaintances—have been contracted by China's youngest billionaire, the CEO of a shadowy company called China Poly, to steal five bronze fountainheads from museums around the world and return them to China. These real-life fountainheads were looted from Beijing's Old Summer Palace by the French and British in 1860 during the Second Opium War. The novel's title, therefore, refers to not only the idealistic heisters, but also the art museums that knowingly purchased China's stolen artifacts. If Will and his crew can recover all five pieces, they'll split a \$50 million payout. For each, the payout represents a release from the pressures they associate with Chinese diaspora identity: achieving financial success and making a name for themselves. The characters' meditations on the loss and hybridity of their identity—never feeling fully at home in China or America—are spot-on. The problem is that these sections gum up the pace of the thriller. Moreover, Li's characters are so educated, career driven, and emotionally aware that it's hard to believe they would agree to jeopardize their futures by doing the heist in the first place. While restoring the fountainheads to China is ethically sound, why do they buy into this brawn-before-brain method of retribution? The characters themselves admit that most successful art repatriations have come about by orchestrated public outcry. Their nuanced views of their own lives do not extend to China's politics or even the fact that they aren't really working for China but rather for a corporation—China Poly. It's as if the two are one and the same.

Key Words: diaspora, the colonization, meditations, hybridity, identity, fountainheads



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The novel portrait of a thief begins the line as “State your name for the record, please”. Knowingly or unknowing we understood that the author needs identity as well as record. At Boston on the cusp of fall, the sackler Museum robbed of twenty- three pieces of priceless Chinese art. The History student of Harvard worked there. When they heard some noise, they felt that may be Chinese are speaking. Finally they understood that something was missing.the missed things are a pair of jade tigers, a dragon vase, A jade cup with three crested bronze birds. Later understood that “What is Ours, Is Not Ours: Chinese Art and Western Imperialism”. When Chinese students writes about looted art, and a few weeks later, Harvard’s largest collection of Asian Art is robbed. The Chinese American told that in his mind lingering the American. Chinese thieves counterpoint to the wail of the alarms. The business card was a mattle black, with the words CHINAPOLY and an international phone number printed on the front in neat block letters and below that,in a messy hand as NICE LIFT.

In this novel nature is portrayed in a good manner. “The sun was setting in a mountain view, evening light pooling on her living room floor. Had it really been less than a year? She could still remember stepping of the plane that first day”. Apart from the stolen art she mentioned that “This is the beginning of the rest of my life. It had been just a little terrifying. Everything she knew, everyone she loved, left behind on another coast”. Her voice is compared with honey because of that sweet and low voice.. Alex opened her laptop, sliding her work laptop to the side. In a few quick keystrokes, she had pulled up the museum intranet. And says “sounds familiar”.But whenever he heard the sound,immediately press delete button and respond to others. Lily drummed her fingers along the curve of her steering wheel. Waiting for the darkness to change. It clearly explains the imperialism. She Kept her gaze on the light,red and fluorescent in the summer dark. Her mind always think about change. She always used the words like, “actually”, “I think we have”. The moonlight cast long,searching shadows against will’s skin. When she said her name there was a weight to it. She replied as “I came here for you”.

Daniel recognized the Chinese name for the old summer palace immediately. The garden of perfect brightness. He was admiring Beijing. Even now the old summer palace had never been rebuilt. He always accept his fault. Finally he picked up his duttel bag, turned back toward the penthouse. “come on”, he said. “Let’s get this over with. “Beijing was waiting for them. But he was not ready to settle there. In the evening time Lily Wu was in Perking and working on a problem set for fluid mechanics. The library was almost full working on papers or pets or just procrastinating on Netflix. Her laptop battery icon began to blink at her, and she snaked her charger beneath the table, fingers running over the smooth black plastic of an empty outlet. It was all so ordinary. Thus using library is an ordinary for everyone’s life.

Lily might have dreamed the week. She had wanted to spread her hands out,let herself be consumed. She had wanted to leave and never look back. A Penthouse with vaulted ceilings and white-veined marble. The CEO of China Poly. The story of the Old Summer Palace, will Chen standing next to her as the sun rose. She never concentrate on usual things.Irene,her best friend, how she moved through this foreign country asif it were hers. In project meeting they corrected everything. Irene had looked up and said, unblinking, “A exploration of pre- revolutionary Chinese history”. It had sounded incredibly boring,even



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to Lily, which had definitely been the point. The five of them on a Zoom call, “Ocean’s Eleven pulled up on Netflix”. They had a list of movies to watch. In Chapter 23, When Daniel stressed down on the Chinese pavilion, His friends are dressed like black and looked like statues. Daniel stood there for a moment, waiting for the wail of alarms, a guard’s distant shouts, the sound of glass like rain on the Salace’s steps. They had six minutes. He set the bronze in his backpack, zipped it shut in one fluid motion. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the slow, steady blink of the overhead camera.

All the characters concerned small things. “Just saying Hello. Three dots typing. Next time you’re in Beijing. Let me know”. He raised a brow. Irene had always been guarded, all hard edges and infallibility. ‘you only just now realised’.

Diasporic Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journey undertaken on account of economic compulsions. A Sause “China has been waiting almost two hundred years for our zodiac heads to cope with it,” she said. “It has been long enough, don’t you think?”.

He thought of the bronze rooster head in his suitcase, the bronze snake head tucked under his bed in his dorm. He didn’t doubt that he wanted to, she could take them away, leave. She had been there when Sackler was robbed, had stolen the art he had written about in the *Crimson* all those weeks. She had seen so much in her worth taking a chance on, WanJulin was China, and China was this Pissin art, its history of loss and the lie. He would not let her down. “It has,” he said. “We’ll make it work”.

Alex always dealing with history and discussed with his friends. “Alex carried history with her. Where her laptop had gone, where there was left to go”. So Peter she left only a side. Other times she looked around this restaurant and wondered how she could ever leave it behind. Silicon Valley, her job, the people who counted on her- so Peter it felt like an anchor, reminding her who she was, who she was meant to be. Other times she only felt the weight, threatening to drag her under. The early morning sun rose over the Dish, set the trail ablaze. She should have left. But there had been two crews there that night, and Irene couldn’t hold but wonder when the authorities would let her out. When he thought of hope, he thought of Beijing. But the Beijing of his childhood didn’t exist anymore. So Peter of his memories here had been with will and Irene. Summer days at the end, the Pacific Ocean shrouded with joy and the waves against their. His dad’s car was in the driveway. Will looked at her. “I thought he wasn’t going to be here for the break”. “Me too,” Daniel said. His gaze touched”

Daniel was not aware of serious things. “Daniel hadn’t known what to expect, His dad was hope early. *Portrait of a Thief* is a part heist and part Chinese American background and gives them the chance to steal five fountainheads stolen from the old summer palace in Beijing for a wealthy Chinese CEO. Inspired by the true story of a spree of heists beginning in 2010, the novel follows five college students hired by a Chinese benefactor to steal five priceless sculptures from various art museums and return them to China, where they were stolen centuries before. The Thief’s story is about a 15 year old boy, Hari Singh, whose life changes when he meets Anil, a 25 year old writer, Anil’s unspoken words and kind gestures leaves a very positive impact on Hari Singh’s life. Hari Singh is a 15 year old, fair handed thief. He is keen on learning how to read and write.



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It is a story about a thief who is the central character of the story. The title gives the readers an idea about the focus of the story and prepares them to expect a narrative about the experiences of a thief. The conclusion of Ruskin Bond's tale, "The Thief's story" is that relationships and human values are significant in life and have the power to transform a person. The Character Hari Singh is a thief. Even though he intended to rob Anil, he was unable to do so because of Anil's integrity and honesty. While working at Harvard's Sackler Museum, Will Chen, a senior majoring in art history. Witnesses a robbery of Chinese art. He quickly finds himself caught up in the investigation. He's actually running the heist. Will and four other Chinese American college students- will's sister and several acquaintances have been contracted by China's youngest billionaire, the CEO of a shadowy company called China Poly, to steal five bronze fountainheads from museums around the world and return them to China. These real life fountainheads were looted from Beijing Old Summer Palace by the French and British in 1860 during, the second Opium war. The novel's title, therefore, refers to not only the idealistic heisters, but also the art museums that knowingly purchased China's stolen artifacts. If will and his crew can recover all five pieces, they'll split a million payout. For each, the payout represents a release from the pressures they associate with Chinese diaspora identity: achieving financial success and making a name for themselves. The characters meditations on the loss and hybridity of their identity never feeling fully at home in China or America are spot on. The problem is that these sections gum up the pace of the thriller. Moreover, Li's characters are so educated, career driven and emotionally aware that it's hard to believe they would agree to jeopardize their futures by doing the heist in the first place. While restoring the fountainheads to China is ethically sound, why do they buy into this brawn before brain method of retribution. The Characters themselves admit that most successful art repatriations have come about by orchestrated public outcry. Their nuanced views of their own lives do not extend to china's politics or even the fact that they aren't really working for China but rather for a corporation- China Poly. It 's as if the two are one and the same. A compelling portrait of the Chinese diaspora experience that doesn't quite land as either literary fiction thriller.

The premise of Portrait of a Thief is a fun one: a group of Chinese Americans, all around the same age, are brought together to steal back certain artifacts from the world's most prestigious museums, some of them know each other a little too well beforehand, others are complete strangers. There's an entire romance subplot that arises out of this, which I thought was kind of corny and forced, but more on that later. A wealthy women in China hires all of them to do this and promises them each a lot of money what seems impossible. They each have their own motives and backstories, which is explained throughout the book. The protagonist in this one is mainly Will Chen who studies Art History at Harvard. He is the stereotypical good student with a lot of charm to back it up, and it is expected he is going to get a job at a museum like the MET. He has got a dark side to him. He hates the fact of lot of these museums feature stolen Chinese art in their halls, and would do anything it takes if presented the opportunity to give them back to his ancestral country. The other characters appear here and there. There's Lily, an engineering student at Duke who has a strange part time hobby of racing cars. Her roommate is Irene Chen, who is known for her wit and ability to anyone and essentially distract them to the point of getting whatever needs to be done in the background done. Daniel, who seems to have a knack for stealing and whose father



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happens to work for like the FBI in the stolen art department. Then there's the romantic interest in New Yorker- turned- Silicon Valley Software engineer Alex.

A senior at Harvard, Will fits comfortably in his carefully curated roles: a perfect student, an art history major and sometimes artist, the eldest son who has always been his parents' American Dream. But when a mysterious Chinese benefactor reaches out with an impossible—and illegal—job offer, Will finds himself something else as well: the leader of a heist to steal back five priceless Chinese sculptures, looted from Beijing centuries ago. His crew is every heist archetype one can imagine—or at least, the closest he can get. A con artist: Irene Chen, a public policy major at Duke who can talk her way out of anything. A thief: Daniel Liang, a premed student with steady hands just as capable of lockpicking as suturing. A getaway driver: Lily Wu, an engineering major who races cars in her free time. A hacker: Alex Huang, an MIT dropout turned Silicon Valley software engineer. Each member of his crew has their own complicated relationship with China and the identity they've cultivated as Chinese Americans, but when Will asks, none of them can turn him down. Because if they succeed? They earn fifty million dollars—and a chance to make history. But if they fail, it will mean not just the loss of everything they've dreamed for themselves but yet another thwarted attempt to take back what colonialism has stolen.

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Equal parts beautiful, thoughtful, and thrilling, *Portrait of a Thief's* a cultural heist and an examination of Chinese American identity, as well as a necessary critique of the lingering effects of colonialism. Ocean's Eleven meets The Farewell in *Portrait of a Thief*, a lush, lyrical heist novel inspired by the true story of Chinese art vanishing from Western museums; about diaspora, the colonization of art, and the complexity of the Chinese American identity. Will is going to need some help if he wants to rob five of the biggest museums in the world. Yes, that's right, Will has to rob *five* museums or else he won't get his 50-million dollars. He needs to steal back the five missing Zodiac Heads from China's Old Summer Palace. These items were looted centuries ago and it's finally time for them to return



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home. Will still needs that crew though so he enlists his sister Irene, his best friend Daniel, his sister's roommate Lily, and a girl named Alex who he met on Tinder when he was freshman. It seems like an old crew but let me explain. Will is the leader. Irene is the con artist. Daniel is the main thief. Lily is the getaway driver. And Alex is the tech genius. Together they make up our squad. But will they succeed? Will they get caught or will they make it out of this as multi-millionaires? The descriptions of this book were hit or miss. There was a lot of great imagery in the book. The descriptions of the art work were beautiful. But few other things had that level of detail.

The pacing also could have been improved upon. It too was hit or miss. I felt it was the worst in the end. There were some time skips that occurred which were hard to take in as it was difficult to figure out just how much time had passed; they did not fit in with the rest of the novel. That wasn't the only issue with the pacing though. Things happened too fast too quickly and then nothing happened for quite some time. This happened every chapter.

Despite these issues, this book was still pretty good. It was amused the entire time and enjoyed the complexity of the characters. All five of the main characters struggle in different ways; readers can easily find a character to latch onto and identify with.

Here large part of this book is about the pressure felt by children in immigrant families to be successful and the identity issues they feel when strung between two incredibly different cultures; specifically those of Chinese descent.

It can talk about colonialism though. Colonialism is a big theme within *Portrait of a Thief*. The idea of an art heist in order to talk about the ownership and power of art is so simple yet genius. History has always been told by conquerors, and what do they do? Keep the spoils of war AKA art. As of late there have been many articles about museums keeping looted works of art, and this novel adds many great points to the conversation. It opens up discussions on the matter that many people probably wouldn't have without. Overall this was a decent debut. We believe the world Grace D. Li has crafted will be able to flourish as a show. There will be more time for character relations to be fleshed out, the pacing fixed, details expanded upon

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