

Durga Mahavidyalaya, Raipur (C.G.)

Department of English

B.A. Semester III

Course Code: ENSE 01, (DSE)

Course Title: **New Literatures in English**

Study Material on **Li Young Lee: I Ask My Mother to Sing**
(Unit I, Section B)

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HoD

Li Young Lee – I Ask My Mother to Sing

- Li Young Lee was born in Jakarta in 1957 to Chinese parents.
- Father had been a medical practitioner
- In 1959, Lee's family fled to United States to escape anti – Chinese sentiment.
- Lives in Chicago, Illinois with his wife Donna, and their two sons.
- Schooled in poetry writing by American poet Gerald Stern.

The Poet's Belief

- Poetry is the language in extremis.
- Beauty is an important metric
- Long poems try to discover and enact the architecture of change in a longer period.
- Poetry reveals truth that is deeper than words.
- Words enter into relationship with other words.
- 'Home' is a site of immense subtlety, potency and crisis.
- There are 'scapegoats' everywhere on this planet.

Writings

- Authored six books of poetry
 - *The Invention of the Darling* (2024)
 - *Behind My Eye* (2008)
 - *The Word From His Song* (2016)
 - *Book of My Nights* (2001)
 - *The City In Which I Love You* (1991)
 - *Rose* (1986)

Honours/Awards/Appreciation

- Ruth Lily poetry prize 2024.
- Writer's Award from Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation (1988).
- Gerald Stern the American poet and tutor praised Lee's "love of plain speech".

Features of Lee's Poetry

- Lee's poetry talks of exile and the Bible.
- A poet of rapture and tenderness.
- Music as tool to preserve family memory.
- A song can link a singer as well as a hearer to their cultural history.

Introduction to

I Ask My Mother To Sing

- Published in Lee's first poetry collection *Rose* in 1986.
- Autobiographical in content.
- Lyrical poem in kind.
- Captures the pain of exile.
- Echoes a longing for homeland.
- Focuses on family loss and nostalgia.

Theme

- Focuses on the emotional power of music
- Highlights the enduring bond to cultural roots.
- Signifies the functionality of oral traditions – about all the wonders in China.
- Emphasizes the need of ancestral connections.
- Exhibits how story of time and people can be transmitted through song.
- Depicts the pain of exile from one's homeland.

Structure of the Poem

- Four stanza pattern:

Stanza one:

The poet's mother and grandmother collectively sing a song about their homeland. The poet had never been there but the 'feel' of the song resounds as cultural memory. The poet wishes that his father could have accompanied them on his accordion if he were alive.

Stanza Two:

Here the speaker names all places that he has never visited for e.g. peeking which is another name of Beijing. He also names the great stone watch and Kuan Ming Lake.

- Four stanza pattern:

Stanza Three:

As an extension to the feeling of the earlier stanza the poet. The song makes him envision how rainwater spill over into the lake. The water lilies then bob back upright to fill up with rain again.

Stanza Four:

The mom and grandmother sing and cry simultaneously suggesting joy in singing but pain due to forced exile.

Thank You