

# THE CUTE AND CONSUMABLE IN “BAD ENGLISH”

DIYA NANAVATI

In her essay “Bad English,” Cathy Park Hong discusses her complex relationship with overcoming the commodification of her culture through her unique expression of “bad English.” As a child of Korean immigrants navigating the English-speaking society of America, her anecdotes reflect the overall minority experience of Asian cultures and their unique ways of overlapping with the English language. Throughout the essay, Hong’s structural choices bolster the point of embracing “bad English”; her examples are disjointed, jumping between anecdotes interspersed with humor or risqué language, mirroring the occasionally incoherent, often unpredictable nature of “bad English” itself. Yet she successfully communicates the complexities of her experience by presenting multiple real-world examples and personal anecdotes regarding language.

Perhaps this is why Hong’s introductory anecdote, her childhood hunger for cutesy Japanese stationery, is so unexpected. Describing her obsession for her animal-shaped erasers as so intense that she “had to repress the urge to bite their heads off” (91) doesn’t seem to connect with the later examples she provides to explore the multifaceted nature of navigating language as an immigrant, none of which mention stationery. Hong highlights how her mother’s conversations with Americans would cause a “white person . . . [to] put on a fright mask of strained tolerance,” articulating her mother’s hardships almost perfectly, but making her discussion of animal erasers seem even more distant from her struggle with language (98-99). What makes the stationery anecdote so curious is that it is the opening for an entire discussion about language, yet it does not mention language even once. At a first glance, this stationery example seems absurd, over the top and only appearing in the first few pages, leaving readers to question Hong’s intent with including it in the first place. We are prompted to consider the importance of Hong’s vivid descriptions of raw, unfiltered desire for something so mundane, and what this metaphor might represent with regards to “bad English.”

To explore the meaning behind Hong’s stationery anecdote, we must consider the not-so-obvious parallels it draws to other parts of the text. While detailing her experiences of interactions between Korean and English in her daily life, Hong emphasizes her disdain towards English. She posits her own method of othering English: “to eat English before it eats [her],” highlighting the consumptive relationship between the two languages (97). She uses violent imagery to denote the predatory nature of the interaction between the two cultures, with American culture “devouring” her own. The idea of raw hunger draws a parallel to Hong’s anecdote about stationery, specifically regarding her relationship with her Hello Kitty mechanical pencils, having

the “urge to bite their heads off” (91). The profane depiction of one person engulfing or consuming an object metaphorizes Hong’s initial premise that English might eat Korean. Ironically, her childhood self in this metaphor plays the role of the perpetrator. By placing herself in the shoes of the perpetrator and mimicking how she feels they act towards Asian cultures, we better understand how she feels about Western English—how it has abused and contorted her family heritage. Through this vivid depiction, we see her perspective on how Western English has brutally and barbarically “consumed” Korean, and by extension, other Asian cultures.

Viewing the anecdote about stationery as a metaphor for this relationship between Western English and Asian languages allows us to see Hong’s other personal examples of language in a new light. For instance, when describing how English has “flattened,” or reduced the authenticity of, Asian cultures, Hong notices how “a new TV Asian accent has emerged . . . [which is] so pandering and full of cute banter” (99). The concept of a “TV accent” seems self-contradictory; accents are inherently natural, but the fact that a “new” one has “emerged” implies that such a TV accent has been artificially manufactured by Westerners to indulge or satisfy their audience—one that has been materialized, almost fetishized, by mass media. Analyzing Hong’s relationship with her stationery can shed light on this relationship. She claims that the reason she wants to devour her stationery is that people have “an overwhelming desire to eat what is cute . . . and therefore cuteness is ideal for mass commodification because of its consumability” (94). The motif of hunger is evident through the parallelism of her “eating” her pencils and English “eating” Korean, which illustrates what she feels has happened to Asian languages—that they have been commodified and consumed by Western English. The anecdote helps visualize the distortion of Asian accents in the media and TV; in making a foreign accent “user-friendly,” they have misrepresented the original language. Hence, we see that this initially perplexing anecdote serves as a tool to help the audience understand this nuanced consumptive relationship between Western English and Asian cultures: it crystallizes the complexities of navigating language as a Korean immigrant into an easily accessible, mundane visual representation.

Yet despite the description of this consumptive interaction, we are still left to consider what Hong is trying to say about this relationship. By detailing her personal experiences, Hong not only identifies a tension, but also justifies why she uses “bad” English as the antidote to English’s consumption of other languages. Repeatedly describing her English as “bad” allows Hong to emphasize how different versions of English, with “verbs forever disagreeing,” are often labeled as “bad” by Americans (92). We are then able to consider how having a concept of “bad” English postulates that there is a “good” English—and that this in itself is a manufactured hierarchical concept maintained by those who desire a sense of superiority. This idea of maintaining superiority by discriminating against “different Englishes” can be understood by seeing it as synonymous with Hong’s stationery anecdote and her

“sadistic desires to master and violate” her vulnerable mechanical pencils (94). The malicious connotation of the terms “violate” and “sadistic” illustrate Hong’s belief that those who segregate “good” and “bad” English are inherently malignant. The idea of “master[ing]” her mechanical pencils further bolsters the idea of the uneven power dynamic between Western and Asian cultures. At first, it seems strange that Hong would explicitly portray herself as selfish, sadistic, and cruel; however, we see she is simply describing her beliefs about the Western world in “mastering” Asian languages—that this stems from a barbaric place, primarily to satiate selfish desires. The absurdity of this anecdote echoes the absurdity of this power dynamic as a whole—as if Hong uses this easy-to-visualize interaction between herself and mechanical pencils to outline how ludicrous it is that Western English is trying to assert its superiority over other languages.

While Hong’s discussion of her relationship with stationery can delineate the dichotomy between English and Asian languages, the question remains: structurally, how does this anecdote suit Hong’s purpose? Why does Hong begin with this example, deliberately throwing readers off with seemingly sexual language by discussing her “special, almost erotic, relationship with [her] stationery,” rather than simply engaging in the discussion of language directly (91)? To interpret her intent, we must consider the nature of “bad English” itself. Throughout her essay, Hong provides multiple examples of what she considers bad English, particularly how it is “short, barbed, and broken” (92). We can begin to see how the way she describes “bad English” as having “subject and object nouns conjoined in odd marriages” parallels her essay structure, particularly with the marriage of anecdotes, real-world examples, and profane language (92). By commenting on the way “bad English” puts ideas and words together that seem “odd,” she characterizes the unconventional nature of this way of speaking. Similarly, Hong places the anecdote about stationery at the start where it seems “odd,” and interrupts other anecdotes with references back to the stationery or overall motif of hunger. By using this striking anecdote as a strategic structural choice to mirror the nature of “bad English,” we can better understand the concept. Just as the stationery anecdote initially seems strangely out of place, but later begins to make sense as it presents a valid point about the Western consumption of Asian languages, Hong elucidates how “bad English” itself may not be so absurd. Yes, “bad English” may be jarring, as emphasized by the discordant nature of the initial stationery anecdote, but this type of English ultimately communicates the same valid points as Westernized English—just in a different way. In demonstrating this point, Hong indirectly communicates to us that once we understand the validity of so-called “bad English,” it isn’t so “bad”; however, we must make the distinction between “bad” English and “different” English so that we begin to appreciate rather than antagonize it.

Hong’s description of her stationery is indeed jarring when it first appears. However, its out-of-place nature not only allows us to interpret the relationship between Western English and Asian languages in a new light, distilling it into an easy-

to-digest visualization, but it also tells us about the nature of “bad English” itself: non-Western forms of English may defy our conventional expectations, but the unique coalescence of disjointed words and phrases communicates something equally beautiful.

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## WORK CITED

“Bad English.” *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, by Cathy Park Hong, One World, New York, 2020, pp. 91–109.

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**DIYA NANAVATI '25CC** is a Financial Economics and Psychology major from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. As an Indian-American who grew up in Southeast Asia, she was exposed to diverse perspectives from a young age. She speaks English, Hindi, and some Mandarin Chinese, which is what initially piqued her interest in learning about the interplay of different cultures and languages. At Columbia, Diya is a part of Global Research and Consulting, Columbia Women’s Business Society, Youth for Debate, and The Sapna Project. When she is not in the library, she can be found taking a walk through Riverside Park, visiting The Met, painting with friends, or exploring the city.