

Repressed Rage: Examining the Model Minority Myth in *Beef*

Lee Sung Jin's *Beef* (2023) follows the domino effect aftermath of a road rage incident between two Asian American protagonists. Our two protagonists are on opposite ends of society, and a large portion of the rage within them lies in the trauma rooted by trying to live under the "model minority" myth: Danny (Steven Yeun) is a struggling handyman, while Amy (Ali Wong) is an upper class entrepreneur. Sharing similar characteristics of self-destructive behavior and emotional repression, the two of them are shaped by the pressures of the model minority myth, and the series strongly critiques how neoliberalism and the model minority upbringing impact adulthood and the emotional state in negative ways.

Taking a look at Paul Nadal's article, "How Neoliberalism Remade the Model Minority Myth" he writes that one of the effects of the Cold War was the "tactical leveraging of the Asian child" mixed with the concept of human capital (79). Human capital is described as being a creation of successful skills through education; Nadal explains that this highlights neoliberalism's theory of subjectivity, in which a person becomes their own form of capital, termed as *homo oeconomicus*. I bring these ideas up in order to put a spotlight on the model minority concept, which *Beef* critiques through its characters: Amy, while unsatisfied, is overall extremely successful, while Danny struggles to find success. This is a showcase on how the neoliberal concepts create inequalities within Asian Americans.

In addition to the model minority concepts created by the Cold War, this gave birth to a new form of *homo oeconomicus*, as written by Nadal, a racial form: *homo asiaticus neoliberalis* (81). Tying this with the previous concept, the general stereotype for Asian Americans at this time featured characteristics of being extremely obedient and orderly, as well as becoming their

own form of success regardless of true personal desires. These expectations and stereotypes shape the lifestyle of Danny and Amy, even through adulthood.

In episode 7, “I Am a Cage”, Danny calls his mother to present their new house, which he built for them. He specifically makes note to her on the phone that he did all of the wiring in the house, telling her “because your house needs to be perfect”. He gets his approval from her, satisfying him by making him feel accomplished to his parents. Later in the episode, this house ends up being burnt down, and it is revealed to be Danny’s fault. In episode 8, “The Drama of Original Choice”, the investigators point to faulty wiring being the purpose of the fire; Danny’s choice to not rely on anyone to help him with the house and that leading to the destruction of it is a strong symbol of himself, often failing in his attempts to succeed on his own and repressing that into self-destructive behaviors. An example of his self-destructive and harmful behavior would be force feeding himself four chicken sandwiches at a restaurant location that is far from his home to cope with his stress in the pilot episode. Throughout the series, Danny also makes multiple comments suggesting an orderliness and sternness to his mindset, statements such as “Western therapy doesn’t work on Eastern minds”, almost as if he’s locked himself into his own box of expectations and ways to think, lacking in independent thinking while also trying his hardest to appear as an independent worker. This is shown through his reliance on following what his parents think, an example being the type of person he and his brother Paul (Young Mazino) should marry.

Episode 8 also provides strong visual insight into Amy’s childhood, and is on the nose with its themes of trauma. I will deep dive into this episode to analyze the character of Amy, as it provides some of the roots of her trauma that leads to her behavior in previous episodes. The episode features three reverse chronological order flashbacks, the first being the opening scene

which follows Amy before she was an entrepreneur, performing sex work. In the mirror, she sees herself as a scary witch, a figure that will continuously show up since this appearance. As Amy returns to her childhood home to visit her parents, she thinks back to when she was a child, on a day where she skipped school. Unexpectedly, she catches her father coming home with another woman, this woman quickly being seen by Amy as the same witch. The third and final flashback in this episode shows Amy at an even younger age, this interaction being an outcome of her eating food she's not supposed to, with her parents arguing in the background. The pattern between these three scenes is the idea of sin, and, to go further, sins that are never spoken of. In this third interaction, the witch tells Amy that her secrets will never be revealed, because no one would love her if they did. These flashbacks give insight to the idea that Amy often feels guilt over her secrets, scared about what others would think of her. Going back to the first flashback, there is a key difference in that iteration of the witch: Amy *becomes* the witch, as she sees it as herself in the mirror. This is key in highlighting that the true source of judgement and hatred towards her only comes from herself, out of fear of being unloved for her true self. This represents the roots of her repressed emotions about herself, resulting in her rage outbursts.

Now that we have taken a look at her view of her self image, let's return to the scenes in the present day with Amy and her parents. We learn that Amy hasn't been in touch with her parents; their argument sparks with her father bringing up how their friend's child ended up moving them into their home. This is important in subtly showing how Asian parents often compare their child to others, a large stereotype within the model minority myth. The idea that Amy was raised under those 'tiger parenting' stereotypes is further supported by her asking her parents why she would ever want her daughter around them, based on the way she turned out. Her acknowledgement of her internal struggles in this interaction is a clear way to portray how

her adulthood has been affected by her tough upbringing. Her father then showcases the pressure of being a first generation in an immigrant family, as he begins to talk about sacrifices they've made for Amy, including moving to the United States. This is common for many Asian immigrant parents to do, as a method of guilt tripping to push their child a certain direction.

With this insight on the way that Amy and Danny both perceive themselves and their parents, let's now look at how the expectations built by their parents weigh them down. Danny is a character who is extremely focused on making his parents proud, done through rising in social class and being successful, the house built for them being one example of an attempt. His drive appears to stem from a place of insecurity, as he isn't motivated through passion or personal likeness. His insecurities revolve around loneliness; a prime example of his fear of loneliness can be seen in episode 9, "The Great Fabricator". In the chaos of this episode, Danny and Paul reach a point of escape from danger. Danny chooses this moment of crisis to share all of his vulnerability with Paul, finally taking responsibility for his actions. He explains how he burned down the house with the wiring, and also how he threw away Paul's college applications, with intentions for them to 'be the same'. Throwing away Paul's college applications is an example of Danny's destructive behavior based around his insecurities, in addition to a fear of judgement from their parents. Seeing Paul, his younger brother, go to college would make Danny feel as if he's being surpassed in status and in the eyes of their parents, a fear that was built through the expectations latched onto them growing up. Being able to finally acknowledge this highlights growth for Danny, however all of his past actions are set in stone and can be traced back to his longing to fulfill the model minority myth. This scene ends with Danny telling Paul that he must stay away from him; as Paul escapes, gunshots can be heard, implying that he was shot and possibly killed. In the finale, it's revealed that he survived, however the implications of him

getting shot after listening to Danny serves as a reflection that Danny holds himself or others back through his mindset of independence. Through trying to be independent throughout the season, Danny sets himself up for failure, seen through the example of their parents' house. This time, he sends Paul away to be independent, leading to his downfall. This full circle moment shines light on themes of understanding the importance of cooperation, communication, and relying on others for support, as choosing to be with Paul in this moment could have helped them both. As a strong trait within neoliberalism, not relying on others and doing everything independently is reflected here.

Moving onto Amy, her story appears to represent a facade, whether it be that of success or happiness, or both. Toxic positivity is a theme that is evident throughout her life, seen through her avoidance of her parents in adulthood, and in her marriage with her husband, George (Joseph Lee). Amy has trouble expressing to him, as he sweeps negative emotions under the rug and constantly promotes positivity, with a lack of balance. In episode 3, "I Am Inhabited by a Cry", Amy speaks with her therapist about her parents. She explains how her father often bottled up emotions, leading to outbursts, while her mother looked down upon ever talking about feelings at all. This monologue ends with her admitting that growing up with her parents taught her to repress her feelings. In adulthood, this is affecting her parenting, as she feels fear over her daughter catching onto similar habits. Jumping to episode 7, Amy asks her therapist if it is possible to love someone unconditionally. This is something that should seem unquestionable, as unconditional love is often found as a parent or as a child. When her therapist questions Amy's parents' love, Amy says that she knows they love her, as seen through sacrifice, but when asked about if that love ever felt conditional, Amy dodges the question and goes back to their conversation about George. These examples are just a couple of many throughout the show that

highlight emotional repression, and different fears that have been born through being raised under the neoliberalist kind of parenting style. A large plot point in the series is Amy's affair with Danny's brother, Paul. I bring this up because it portrays a genuine connection between two people; they open up to each other, and are honest in ways that they aren't with other people around them (Paul to Danny, Amy to George). Having two complete strangers interact in this way of purity, reflects on how baggage and past trauma impact interactions with people that know each other. The repression of emotions causes communication to be more and more difficult as time goes on.

Danny and Amy both represent different aspects of the model minority myth through their mindsets and decision-making. Danny's constant attempts and failures to independently create success and impress his parents feeds into the stereotypes of compliance and obedience, while Amy's affair with Paul and her mindset towards parenting come from her experience growing up under parents who raised her blindly under the model minority concept. The two of them share similar traits of rage outbursts as a product of their different attempts to fulfill this concept, showing how this kind of upbringing and the neoliberalist mindset can affect mental health and judgement in adulthood.

Works Cited

Sung Jin, Lee, creator. *Beef*. A24, 2023.

Nadal, Paul. How Neoliberalism Remade the Model Minority Myth. *Representations*. 1 August 2023; 163 (1): 79–99