

CULTURAL IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN NGUYEN'S "THE AMERICANS"

Sari Fitria¹, Paras Vincenct L. Llyoid², Laksmly Ady Kusumoriny³

^{1,3}Universitas Pamulang, ²Polytechnic University of The Philippines

dosen01462@unpam.ac.id

Abstract

The study scrutinizes the negotiation of a person's cultural identity in Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story, "The Americans". As a diaspora, Nguyen wrote the character of Claire Carver in "The Americans" as a concrete depiction of a diaspora who struggles with negotiating cultural identity. This negotiation is depicted by tensions between Claire (a second generation of a multiracial family), who missed her Asian identity, and his father, who wants her to retain American identity. Therefore, this study explores the homeland (Asia) and host land (America) position in this diaspora character. The cultural identity and diaspora concept by Stuart Hall is applied to critically assess the identity negotiation experienced by the character in the short story. Then, this study applies the content analysis method. The data forms are sentences that indicate identity negotiation. The findings of the study indicate that the diaspora character engages in cultural identity negotiation, which involves American cultural identity of her father as the one who dominates her to embrace American identity and her Asian cultural identity, Vietnamese, as the effect of confusion of her cultural identity since she is a mixed race of black American and a Japanese. This study thus suggests that a further study that celebrates the diaspora's identity may participate in cherishing the diversity.

Keywords: cultural identity, diaspora, homeland, host land, identity negotiation

INTRODUCTION

The most prevalent form of diaspora occurs when individuals from less developed nations opt to migrate to more developed nations primarily due to economic scarcity and unfavorable conditions in their home countries, also known as voluntary migration. The diaspora concept is closely related to migration, which can be forced or voluntary migration (Laçin, 2019). The voluntary migration may be driven by various factors, including limited job prospects, political instability, poverty, inadequate access to essential services, and insufficient education and healthcare opportunities (Berhanu, 2019). Many individuals struggle to migrate to more developed countries for better economic opportunities and living standards. These destinations typically provide a more robust economy, higher pay, increased job prospects, social welfare benefits, modern infrastructure, and enhanced access to education and healthcare. These appealing factors

draw individuals who wish to leave behind the challenges they encounter in their home countries. However, for a diaspora individual, the past and present are often connected. Consequently, it may destroy the distance between the motherland and the new alien country (Rajkumar & Vijayakumar, 2023).

"The Americans", originally published in Chicago Tribune in 2010, tells a story about an American couple visiting their daughter who lived in Vietnam. In this story, Nguyen showed his masterful talent of writing in mixing the topics of parenting, trauma, Vietnam Syndrome, diaspora, and cultural identity negotiation. This story provides a distinctive perspective on diaspora by portraying a character, Claire Carver, who chooses to migrate from a more developed nation to a less developed nation to discover her true identity and assist the local Vietnamese. This portrayal challenges the conventional narrative of diaspora primarily being driven by economic scarcity and emphasizes the pursuit of personal and cultural exploration. In the story, the character's decision to migrate from a more developed nation to a less developed nation relates to her identity negotiation between her homeland and host land. Instead, the character seeks a deeper understanding of her identity by immersing herself in the culture and experiences of the Vietnamese locals.

Claire's motivation to serve the Vietnamese locals highlights her desire to embrace her Asian identity. By choosing to reside in Vietnam, she embraces the challenges and opportunities for personal growth that arise from living in an unfamiliar environment. Through her interactions with the local population, she aims to bridge cultural divides, foster understanding, and contribute to the well-being of the community she has chosen to serve. Claire's pursuit of a deeper understanding of her identity through immersion in Vietnamese culture and serving the local population was hindered by her conservative father, James Carver, a US war veteran, who was an American soldier who took part in the Vietnam War and had guilty for losing in the war.

James Carver's contrasting viewpoint emphasizes the importance of retaining American identity. His perspective reflects the complex interplay between personal identity, heritage, and the influence of one's upbringing. As a war veteran, he may hold strong patriotic sentiments and a belief in the value of preserving one's national identity. From his perspective, her daughter's desire to embrace her passion in Vietnam may be seen as a threat to her American identity or a rejection of the values and experiences he holds. In this case, Carver may experience Vietnam syndrome. This syndrome indicates that veterans still vividly remember the war and can be the cause of James Carver's strong willingness to prevent her daughter to side Vietnam (McQuade, 2014). This has resulted in Claire experiencing identity negotiation throughout the story, which lies on Vietnam and America as the homeland and host land.

Initially, previous research on cultural identity and diaspora was conducted by Alivin, entitled *Identity Negotiation in the Age of Global in Exophoric Novels*. This study discusses identity negotiation done by the Muslim diaspora in several novels. It is revealed that identity negotiation occurs in terms of hegemony and power relations (Alivin, 2021). Another research on diaspora was presented by Zaarour Mukattash and Amrieh, entitled

Coming of Age in the Arab Diasporic Künstlerroman: Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer (2013) and Nada Awar Jarrar's An Unsafe Haven (2016). This research focuses on the Arabic diaspora and their complex identity that engages with religious values. For this Arabic diaspora, family values related to Islam must be done, leading the diaspora to a dilemma in defining their identity (Zaarour et al., 2023). Another research was conducted by Amany El Sawy, *Deconstructing the Exotic and Oppressed Muslim Odalisque in Mohja Kahf's Poetry.* This study focuses on the cultural intermediary between Muslims and Christians in America and attempts to deconstruct stereotypes about Muslim culture and religion. The study found that new spaces are created for the Muslim diaspora, especially women, that have neither flourished in Western Orientalist nor Muslim nationalist perspectives (El-Sawy, 2021). Then, a study by Padie Muhammad Rallie Rivaldy et al. *Rethinking Home and Identity of Muslim Diaspora in Shmasie's Home Fire and Hamid's Exile West* discusses the identity construction of diaspora characters and the meaning of home. It is found that identity for the diaspora is something complex that leads the diaspora to rebuild the meaning of 'home' (Rivaldy et al., 2020).

This study applies Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity and diaspora. It is a model that perceives cultural identity as one of two co-existing positions (Hall, 1996). The model depicts how the positions serve as co-existing constituents that make up a human person's cultural identity. The relationship between these two positions is explained explicitly in the following paragraphs. The first one regards cultural identity as a social entity that a group of individuals shares. This can be in the form of shared history, language, ancestry, and even territory. This point focuses on shared cultural codes that provide a sense of belongingness to a particular culture with a stable, unchanging continuum over a constantly changing society. This is what a diaspora should discover, embrace, and express through different mediums.

In the second position, cultural identity is described as something that is not discovered but is produced (Hall, 1996). Despite all the similarities a population shares, a fixed notable difference still constitutes the idea of 'what we have become.' This model of ruptures and discontinuities positions the essence of cultural identity as a matter of 'becoming' and 'being.' It is depicted that identity belongs to the future as much as to the past. The second position is a manifestation of the reality of cultural identity, especially for diaspora individuals. History has been very cruel to these individuals. They have suffered greatly in both their physical and mental states as human beings. The undeniable truth is that history is a part of their cultural identity. Their class identity and position are never finally 'settled': the balance of forces within them remains open (Hall & Jefferson, 2006).

This is one of the major factors why individuals tend to migrate to a different country. They are urged to experience cultural diversity in a multicultural society. To be accepted regardless of what history has dictated. However, instead of a comforting, diverse social environment, they were left with inhumane foundations of prejudice. These experiences can result in a social crisis towards the cultural identity of these individuals. The relationship between these vectors is very critical for one's cultural identity. The deficiency

of one vector can cause the whole diagram to collapse, resulting in identity crisis and depression. This can cause an individual to malfunction in their core roles in society. A single malfunction can strongly affect the people surrounding that specific individual, which, again, can result in an endless chain of social malfunction.

Specifically, the concept of diaspora focusing on Asian and Asian American studies draws attention to the competition between "diaspora" and "transnationalism" as competing frameworks for studying dispersed communities sharing a common origin (Hu-DeHart, 2015). The pervasive usage of the term "diaspora" in academic and popular contexts is acknowledged, with various media articles cited as examples. However, it raises concerns about the potential oversimplification of Chinese identity and culture through the lens of the diaspora, suggesting the necessity for a critical reevaluation. In the context of diaspora, the concepts of home and abroad become intertwined, blurring the distinction between them. Diaspora transcends traditional notions of fixed geographical boundaries, allowing the notion of home to exist overseas even though it cannot free the diaspora from isolation (Swetha & Gayathri, 2023). This fluidity creates a persistent tension between one's place of origin and current location, prompting diasporic individuals to create their own unique space. In fact, a diaspora character cannot delete the old culture (Fitria et al., 2023). The diaspora also tends to experience identity dilemmas (Borgohain & Ammari, 2021).

In this study, the diaspora character also faces a matter of cultural identity negotiation. This study focuses on identity negotiation with the host land and homeland concept. In the previous diaspora studies and their concern with cultural identity, the characters' homeland refers to their ethnicity or country of origin. However, in this study, the homeland that the diaspora character misses is not her country of origin, Japan. Interestingly, Nguyen creates a diaspora character who chooses to live in Vietnam, which represents Asian identity to complete her longing for homeland.

METHOD

This research focuses on discovering cultural identity negotiation of diaspora in a literary text. The research steps cover collecting, categorizing, and analyzing the data from the data source. The data source is taken from Viet Tanh Nguyens' short story entitled "The Americans" which was first published in 2010 in the Chichago Tribune as one of the finalists of 2010 Nelson Algren Short Story Awards. The data in this research relates to the cultural identity negotiation of a diaspora character. To collect the data, an in-depth reading of Nguyen's short story, "The Americans", is done. Then, the quotations from the short story that relate to the cultural identity negotiation are categorized. This categorization relates to the homeland and host land under the perspective of the diaspora concept. Finally, the data are analyzed and presented as an essay so that the cultural identity negotiation experienced by the diaspora character can be revealed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of diaspora was depicted differently in Nguyen's "The Americans". It somewhat features a different point of view that perceives diaspora in an inverted angle. One of the main characters from the story is Claire Carver, a Japanese-American teacher from the United States who migrated indefinitely to Vietnam. By technicalities, she is a diaspora, residing in a different place and culture. Most cases of diasporas feature individuals who tend to migrate from a third-world country to a first-world country due to economic and cultural reasons. However, her character is somewhat considered different compared to typical diasporas because she comes from a first-world country and has a history of being a colonizer. Besides, the host land in this short story relates to the father, and homeland does not refer to the country of origin of the diaspora character but is replaced by another Asian country, Vietnam. Thus, this study analyzes Claire's diasporic character and her experiences with cultural identity negotiation using Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity. The cultural identity negotiation that is experienced by Claire is the negotiation between American cultural identity and Vietnamese cultural identity.

American Cultural Identity: Father Figure as Domination of Host Land

Claire's father, James Carver, is a war veteran. He served as a fighter pilot and found great fulfillment in his military service and its purpose for his home country. He is an African-American man who married Michiko, whom he met in Japan, and they have created a life together in the United States. It can be revealed that James Carver's character represents the American identity that dominates Claire. Hence, Claire's father and his brutal history in the army is an unchanging fact that Claire must live up to for her entire life. The story clearly emphasizes that Claire's nationality and country's history have severely affected her decisions. Her father also continuously encourages her to embrace her American identity. His response to Claire's comment about the apartment reflects a belief in the superiority of American economic standards and a sense of entitlement based on their American identity, as seen in Quotation 1 below:

Quotation 1

*"Couldn't you find a better place, dear?" Michiko fanned herself with her sun hat.
"You don't even have an air conditioner."
"This is better than what most people have. Even if people could afford this place, there'd be an entire family in here."
"You're not a native," Carver said. "You're an American."
"That's a problem I'm trying to correct." (Nguyen, 2010)*

The interactions between characters in the given excerpt vividly portray the argument regarding cultural and economic standards. During the tour of Claire's apartment in Vietnam, her parents, Michiko, and James Carver, reacted in distinct ways

that shed light on their perspectives. Michiko immediately advised Claire to find a better apartment with amenities like air conditioning, implying that the current living situation was not up to their expectations. In response, Claire politely expressed her gratitude for having a place like an apartment and noted that even if people could afford it, multiple family members would likely live in such a small space. James Carver's subsequent reply added another layer to the argument. He stated, *"You're not a native. You're an American."* This line reflects how the father character wants her daughter to hold her American identity, where cultural and economic standards are often imposed on other countries. It implies a generalization that every American deserves to live in an apartment that meets their standards, including having air conditioning while suggesting that natives of Vietnam are content with lower standards. These lines highlight the cultural and economic divide and the unequal power dynamics between American countries and others. It signifies the underlying assumptions and biases based on nationality and reinforces the notion of superiority and privilege associated with being American, which Carver proposes. In his expectation, Claire will prioritize her American identity due to this argument.

James Carver's characteristics in "The Americans" consistently represents American identity in Claire's cultural identity, resulting in a continuous negotiation of her identity. It can be observed from Quotation 2 below:

Quotation 2

"I like it here, Dad."

"You like it here," Carver said. "Look at this place."

Claire deliberately swept her gaze over her classroom. "I'm looking." "What your father means is that we want you back home because we love you."

"That's what I mean."

"I am home, Mom. It sounds strange, I don't know how to put it, but I feel like this is where I'm supposed to be. I have a Vietnamese soul."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Carver shouted.

(Nguyen, 2010)

The excerpts highlight his resistance to embracing Claire's connection to Vietnam and his insistence on maintaining their American identity and way of life. When Claire expresses her contentment with being in Vietnam by saying, *"I like it here, Dad,"* Carver immediately challenges her perspective. He reacts with disbelief, as indicated by his remark, *"You like it here? Look at this place."* His response emphasizes the stark contrast between their accustomed American standards and the unfamiliarity of the Vietnamese environment. Michiko further attempts to persuade Claire to return home by expressing her husband's love for her. James believes that their home, defined by American cultural norms, is where she truly belongs. Michiko aligns her sentiments with the assumed collective feelings of the family by stating, *"What your father means is that we want you back home because we love you."* However, Claire remains firm in her stance, asserting that she

feels a sense of belonging in Vietnam and even identifies with the country on a deeper level. She describes it as having a "Vietnamese soul." This sentiment challenges James Carver's perspective and his understanding of cultural identity. In response to Claire's statement, Carver's frustration and disagreement are evident in his outburst: "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." His emotional reaction reflects his inability to comprehend or accept Claire's connection to Vietnam and challenges cultural identity as a fixed and predetermined concept. Through these exchanges, Carver's character represents the resistance to Claire's cultural identity, the clash between the American cultural norms he upholds, and the sense of belonging and cultural affinity Claire feels towards Vietnam. The contrasting viewpoints highlight the complexities and challenges of navigating cultural identities within a multicultural context.

Besides, James Carver shows American domination to strongly encourage Claire not to be more into her Asian side, and it can be shown in Quotation 3 below:

Quotation 3

But seen up close, from this height, the countryside was so poor that the poverty was neither picturesque nor pastoral: tin-roofed shacks with dirt floors, a man pulling up the leg of his shorts to urinate on a wall, laborers wearing slippers as they pushed wheelbarrows full of bricks. (Nguyen, 2010)

The way Carver describes Vietnam represents how he wants Claire not to adore anything about Vietnam. Several negative words, such as poor, poverty, shacks, dirt, and laborers, frame Vietnam as a pointless country. For Carver, it seems that only Vietnam has that ambiance that he does not want Claire to be a part of. In fact, Carver's description is just a kind of cynicism since what he sees is typical things that can be found in the countryside in every country. Besides, Carver's ignorance of everything related to Vietnam is illustrated in Quotation 4 below:

Quotation 4

"Angkor Wat was pretty educational." Carver didn't like being educated on his vacations. "And we visited that terrible war museum in Saigon. I don't really feel like seeing any more horrors." (Nguyen, 2010)

The quotation above shows that there is nothing good in Vietnam for Carver. It indicates he does not want his daughter to be concerned about her Asian identity. He constantly perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Vietnam. He rejects the idea that visiting historical places in Vietnam can improve his knowledge. The word 'horror' implies he does not want to side with Vietnam. This notion also relates to Carver's Vietnam syndrome due to his experience as an American soldier who took part in the Vietnam War. The defeat of America in the Vietnam War is regarded as sickness and

weakness (Jansson, 2016). Thus, Carver tries to make her daughter stay away from Vietnam by arguing Claire's willingness to be a part of Vietnam. It can be seen in Quotation 5 below.

Quotation 5

"When I majored in women's studies. When I told you, I was going to Vietnam to teach. And those are just the most recent ones to come to mind."

"But those things are stupid." (Nguyen, 2010)

Nguyen describes Claire as the diaspora character who must engage with the problem of identity negotiation. Her admiration for her homeland, Vietnam, is problematized since her father confronts it. It is pictured from the word 'stupid' that addresses Claire's idea to continue her life in Vietnam. This implies that Claire, as a diaspora character, is in an in-between state. She wants to pursue her dream of side her Asian identity, but her father forced her to stand by her American identity. This leads Claire to negotiation. For a diaspora character, homeland and host land are inseparable (Fitria, 2022).

Finally, Carver's insistence on American identity can be revealed when he persistently describes Vietnam as a nasty place. This affects Claire's cultural identity negotiation since her father still condemns Vietnam even though she has given him silent treatment. It can be seen in Quotation 6 below.

Quotation 6

When Carver rolled down his window, he discovered that the smell of the countryside was just as unpleasant, the air thick with blasts of soot from passing trucks, the rot of buffalo dung, the fermentation of the local cuisine that he found briny and nauseating. All of the sights, sounds, and smells depressed Carver, along with Claire's and Michiko's silent treatment of him, unrelenting since yesterday. (Nguyen, 2018: 92)

As the one who wants Claire to fade her Asian identity, Carver frames Vietnam as a troubled place in terms of environment, weather, sanity, and foodstuff. His dislike of the smell of the countryside and buffalo dung reveals how he does not want Claire to be a part of this place. His complaint about the sound of a passing truck implies his unwillingness to accept Vietnam. His disgust for the local cuisine strengthens the idea that Vietnam is entirely a failure for him. All of these data prove that Carver entirely rejects Vietnam as a part of Claire's identity. Consequently, this will work on Claire's cultural identity negotiation since she needs to deal with her choice of Vietnamese identity and his father's superiority over American identity.

Vietnamese Cultural Identity as the Homeland

This part discusses identity negotiation done by the diaspora character, Claire, who wants to celebrate her Asian identity. In this case, Claire is a second generation of a multiracial family. Her mother is Japanese American, but Claire never visits Japan. Later, she gets a chance to work in Vietnam, which makes her feel like a homeland in Asia. Thus, even though she has no Vietnamese blood, this place is considered to represent Claire's Asian bloodline. It can be seen in Quotation 7 below.

Quotation 7

*"How many students do you have, dear?" Michiko said.
 "Four classes of thirty each."
 "That's too much," Carver said. "You're not paid enough to do that."
 "They really want to learn. And I really want to teach."
 "So you've been here two years." Carver toed a slab of tile flaking loose from the floor.
 "How much longer are you planning to stay?"
 "Indefinitely." (Nguyen, 2018: 90)*

In the quotation above, Nguyen reveals how the diaspora character wants to celebrate her Asian identity by staying in Vietnam. She feels comfortable being a part of Vietnam even though the salary is not as excellent as in America. On the other hand, her father, Carver, unstopable questions her decision as an effort to make her daughter embrace her American identity. The word 'indefinitely' implies how Vietnam can fulfill Claire's homeland identity. Besides, for the diaspora individual, their cultural identity is actually complex, because James Carver is a black American, while Michiko, a Japanese with a fair skin, and Claire, a mixed colored American, as shown in Quotation 8 below.

Quotation 8

*"Haven't they seen tourists before?" Carver said.
 "Not like us." Claire unsealed a pack of cigarettes and lit one.
 "We're a mixed bag."
 "They don't know what to make of us?" Michiko said. "I'm used to it, but you're not."
 "Try being a Japanese wife at a Michigan air base in 1973."
 "Touché," Claire said.
 "Try being a black man in Japan," Carver said. "Or Thailand."
 "But, you could always go home," Claire said. "There was always a place for you somewhere. But there's never been a place for me."
 (Nguyen, 2018: 88-89)*

In Quotation 8 above, the set of characters experiences a moment of cultural encounter, prompting reflections on James and Michiko's mixed identities (being an interracial couple) and the reactions they elicit. Carver's comment suggests that their

presence as tourists is distinct and unfamiliar, prompting Claire's observation that they are a "mixed bag." Michiko's statement implies that the locals are uncertain about interpreting or responding to their group. Claire and Michiko share their experiences of being seen as different, whether as a Japanese wife at an American air base or as a Black man in Japan or Thailand. However, Claire's feeling is more problematic. As a diaspora character, she senses that her homeland and host land do not belong to her. This exchange is an ongoing negotiation of diaspora character.

Then, the short story also consistently illustrates how Claire's character engages with cultural identity negotiation through her continuous attempts to fix the mistakes of his father's past as hers, as seen in Quotation 9 below:

Quotation 9

*"I said I have a Vietnamese soul. It's a figure of speech. It's an expression. It means I think I've found someplace where I can do some good and makeup for some of the things you've done."
 "I've done? What have I done?"
 "You bombed this place. Have you ever thought about how many people you killed? The thousands? The tens of thousands?"
 (Nguyen, 2018:95)*

The quotation above implies that Claire also engages with Vietnam syndrome as she feels guilty about what happened in the Vietnam War. It triggers her to negotiate her cultural identity by being on the side of her Asian identity, which Vietnam represents. The quotation showcases a pivotal confrontation between Claire and her father, wherein she confronts him about the consequences of his actions in the past. Her statement, *"I said I have a Vietnamese soul,"* reveals her deep connection and empathy towards the Vietnamese people, emphasizing her desire to impact their lives positively. By expressing that Claire believes she has found a place where she can do good and compensate for her father's actions, she symbolizes the continuous attempt to address past mistakes and make amends. The exchange between Claire and her father highlights the generational divide and the weight of historical actions. Her accusation that her father bombed the place reflects the larger historical context of the Vietnam War and its devastating impact on the Vietnamese people. Hence, she challenges her father to consider the magnitude of the lives lost, emphasizing the thousands, if not tens of thousands, of casualties resulting from his actions. Claire's persistent efforts to hold her father accountable demonstrate her unwavering commitment to rectifying the wrongs of the past. This also implies her partiality to Vietnam as a longing for her homeland. This notion of cultural identity and its influence on destiny and behavior is exemplified in the shot story. The story portrays the transformation of James Carver's character and consistently highlights Claire's unwavering determination not to maintain her father's American identity. A crucial confrontation between Claire and her father is a pivotal moment where she confronts him

about the consequences of his actions. Claire's powerful statement, "I said I have a Vietnamese soul," reflects cultural identity negotiation.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of Hall's model, the diaspora character's negotiation of cultural identity in Nguyen's "The Americans" can be examined in terms of host land and homeland. Concerning the host land, the character's father represents American identity and its associated values. His unstoppable encouragement to make her daughter embody American identity problematizes Claire's cultural identity negotiation. Then, referring to the homeland, Claire's decision to migrate and immerse herself in Vietnamese culture challenges the stability of her cultural identity and triggers identity negotiation. Interestingly, it is found that Vietnam is such a redefining of the homeland by this diaspora character. The result of this study reveals that homeland does not only refer to the country of origin. It can be another country that represents the diaspora's homeland.

Lastly, the critical examination of identity negotiation in "The Americans" highlights the complexity and fluidity of these concepts. It emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals' diverse experiences and perspectives in diasporic communities and acknowledges the impact of historical and societal factors on negotiating cultural identity. By embracing a comprehensive understanding of cultural identity and diaspora, society can foster inclusivity and appreciation for the richness and diversity of human experiences. Thus, a further study that celebrates the diaspora's identity may participate in cherishing the diversity.

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