

LANGUAGE, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF ASIAN-AMERICAN NARRATIVES

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Abstract

As the melting pot, America gains numerous advantages in term of culture such as rich in cultural diversity, exchange in language, values and tradition, rise in technology and innovation, and numerous additional advantages. However, it also has many disadvantages such as discrimination and racism, domination in majority culture, social inequality, identity confusion, and many more. This research aims at scrutinizing the interconnection between language, cultural memory, and cultural identity in selected Asian-American narratives employing Jan Asmann's Cultural Memory theory. Asmann formulated his cultural memory as medium for society where they can capture, preserve, and recall using language. In diasporic society where they have a collective identity rooted in their homeland, language plays important role in preserving tradition, history, and myth. It also becomes a tool of negotiation when identities constantly being reconstructed. This is qualitative research using interpretive approach focusing on Asian-American films, *The Farewell* (2019) and *Minari* (2020). These films provide language both in bilingual and multilingual in their conversation, storytelling which engaging generations mindsets, and symbolism in culture from their homeland. There are three steps in collecting the data, first, the language analysis to signify the cultural reference, second, the cultural memory to analyze the complexity of the problems, third, the cultural identity stage to answer the identity negotiation in their cross-cultural environment. The findings indicate that there are methods to preserve culture and tradition from their homeland passing from generation to generation. Language serves as both repository of memory, culture, and tradition, it performs as identity formation as well. By reflecting and demonstrating how Asian-American narratives serving as cultural memory and identity formation, this research contributes to cross-cultural language, shaping the evolution on cultural diversities and identities in Asian-American communities.

Keywords: language, cultural memory, cultural identity, Assmann

INTRODUCTION

Different cultural, linguistic, and ethnic groups interact and reshape the nation's identity in the United States, which has long been referred to as a "melting pot." While emphasizing the diversity's richness, this image also hides the conflicts and complexity that arise in diasporic societies. While cultural heterogeneity presents chances for creativity, intercultural communication, and heritage conservation, it also creates tensions

including racism, assimilation pressures, and identity conflicts (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970; Hollinger, 2016). As they negotiate the difficult task of striking a balance between cultural continuity and adaptation to American society, Asian-American communities have a particularly important place in this paradoxical situation.

Language becomes an important component of this negotiation, serving as a storehouse of cultural memory and identity in addition to being a tool for communication. Language has symbolic meaning for diasporic communities; it serves as a means of preserving memories of the homeland, a marker of membership, and a means of passing ideals down through generations (Assmann, 2011; Fishman, 1999). The theory of cultural memory developed by Jan Assmann (2011) posits that symbolic structures, such as rituals, traditions, and language, mediate and maintain collective memory, enabling societies to negotiate the present while preserving their history. Diasporic narratives use language as a living archive in this way, allowing groups to engage in hybrid forms of identity building while also resisting cultural erasure.

Asian-American stories in literature and cinema have frequently depicted these conflicts, where linguistic practices, generational divides, migratory histories, and cultural memory converge. Films like Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019) and Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (2020) offer particularly interesting case studies for analyzing the relationship between language, memory, and identity. Using bilingual or multilingual dialogues that highlight language's dual roles as a bridge and a barrier between cultures, both films show immigrant families battling cultural displacement and generational gaps. In *Minari*, a Korean immigrant family struggles to integrate memories of their homeland with agricultural life in rural America, while *The Farewell* centers its story on the mystery of a family sickness inside a Chinese diasporic context. Language is a symbolic medium that transmits cultural continuity, generational conflict, and identity negotiation in both situations, rather than just being a tool for communication.

According to diaspora and cultural studies scholars, diasporic identities are created through continuous processes of hybridity and negotiation rather than being stable or distinct (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990). According to Stuart Hall (1990), diasporic identity is linked to shared histories while acknowledging its fluid and dynamic nature. He highlights that cultural identity is shaped through both "being" and "becoming." Likewise,

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity emphasizes the liminal regions where cultural meaning is redefined and challenged. This study builds on these theoretical underpinnings by using Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory to provide light on how Asian-American narratives use language as a means of preserving and transforming cultural traditions, historical consciousness, and diasporic identities.

This research is important because it takes a cross-cultural approach that connects Asian-American cultural narratives with memory studies. Although earlier research has looked at how race, migration, and generational conflict are portrayed in Asian-American texts (Eng, 2001; Marchetti, 2017), fewer studies have looked at how language, cultural memory, and identity are intertwined using Assmann's cultural memory theory. In order to close this gap and add to the current conversations about how diasporic communities deal with cultural belonging in a world that is becoming more interconnected by the day, this study will analyze *The Farewell* and *Minari*. This study aims to explore how language functions as a medium of cultural memory in Asian-American narratives and examine how linguistic practices and intergenerational storytelling shape and modify cultural identity. By doing thus, this research contributes to our knowledge of diasporic cultural processes and clarifies the wider significance of cultural memory in migration and globalization contexts.

LITERARY REVIEWS

Jan Assmann's Concept of Cultural Memory

Assmann's concept of cultural memory offers a useful theoretical framework for analyzing diasporic narratives. Cultural memory, according to Assmann (2011), is the collectively held knowledge of the past that has been kept and passed down through symbolic forms including language, customs, myths, and rituals. Cultural memory serves as a thread of continuity that unites societies over generations, in contrast to individual memory, which is restricted to personal experience. In order to shape their current identities and guide their futures, it enables groups to remember and reconstruct their shared past.

Assmann makes a distinction between cultural memory and communicative memory in 1995 and 2011. In contrast to cultural memory, which is long-term, institutionalized, and passed on through symbolic systems like writing, monuments, and

oral traditions, communicative memory is short-term and based on live generations and interpersonal communication. Cultural memory becomes essential in diasporic environments because groups depend on language, storytelling, and rituals to maintain their ties to their origin. Therefore, language serves as a symbolic form that steadily maintains cultural identity throughout time, in addition to being a tool for communication.

Cultural Memory and Diaspora Identity

Memory of the home culture and cultural adaptation are at odds, which is a hallmark of diasporic identity. According to Stuart Hall (1990), identity is never set in stone but rather is created through "being" and "becoming" processes in which societies balance their past and current reality. The "third space," where cultural meanings are always disputed and revised, is also highlighted by Homi Bhabha's (1994) idea of hybridity. As diasporic populations navigate hybrid cultural environments, cultural memory serves as a resource for reaffirming their sense of identity.

A key component of this negotiation is language. According to Fishman (1999), language acts as a storehouse of communal memory as well as a sign of ethnic identity. While parents frequently stress ancestral language as a way to preserve culture, children reared in the United States may choose English for social integration, making intergenerational language transmission a critical area of conflict for Asian-American families. *The Farewell* and *Minari* effectively illustrates this tension through linguistic decisions that highlight larger struggles over tradition, assimilation, and identity. Diasporic communities are maintained not just by physical movement but also by cultural practices of remembrance, rituals, myths, and language that serve as an anchor for collective identity, according to diaspora studies scholars (Clifford, 1994; Tölölyan, 1996). This is how cultural memory serves as a transgenerational archive, keeping groups linked to their roots while they adjust to new surroundings.

Film as a Medium of Cultural Memory

Cinema has become a potent tool for negotiating and representing cultural memory. In her work on "prosthetic memory," Landsberg (2004) makes the case that film allows viewers to embody memories outside of their immediate personal experiences, which fosters empathy and cross-cultural understanding. Diasporic filmmakers use film

as a medium to express the intricacies of identity development and cultural exile. *Minari* and *The Farewell* are prime examples of this role of film. In order to portray cultural memory, both films use visual and linguistic symbolism as storytelling techniques. Language serves as a sign of familial alienation or belonging, and the interaction between Mandarin and English in *The Farewell* dramatizes generational differences. The usage of English in public settings and Korean in private family settings in *Minari* illustrates the dual cultural positioning of the immigrant experience. Thus, these movies not only tell personal tales but also act as cultural repositories, conserving and sharing diasporic memories with larger audiences.

Filmic language, gestures, and rituals serve as cultural memory bearers that connect the past and present, supporting Assmann's (2011) theory that cultural memory is mediated through symbolic forms. These stories highlight language as a symbolic and communicative medium, demonstrating how remembering processes ingrained in daily life help diasporic people create cultural identities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative interpretative methodology, which is especially appropriate for examining cultural narratives and symbolic representations in motion pictures. Qualitative research prioritizes the investigation of meaning, context, and interpretation over measurement or forecasting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researcher can investigate the representation and negotiation of language, cultural memory, and identity in cinematic texts by using a qualitative design in the context of Asian-American diasporic tales. The interpretative paradigm serves as the foundation for this study, which aims to comprehend cultural occurrences by examining the viewpoints and symbolic systems of the communities under investigation (Schwandt, 2014). Providing a thorough, contextualized understanding of how cultural memory functions within diasporic identities is the aim, not making generalizations that apply to everyone

Data is primarily derived from two Asian-American films: *The Farewell*, which was directed by Lulu Wang in 2019, tells the story of a Chinese-American family that is battling the cultural tension between Eastern collectivism and Western individualism through intergenerational communication in Mandarin and English. The semi-

autobiographical film *Minari* (directed by Lee Isaac Chung, 2020) tells the tale of a Korean immigrant family in the US, emphasizing intergenerational relationships, integration challenges, and the maintenance of Korean cultural values via language and custom.

Three criteria were used to choose these movies: first, as cultural literature that reflect Asian-American perspectives, both have received high praise from critics and are frequently debated. Second, both emphasize language usage (multilingualism, code-switching, and bilingualism) as essential to family communication. Third, cultural memory, heritage, and identity development are topically addressed in both. The interpretation is contextualized and supported by secondary material, such as academic publications, movie reviews, and theoretical works on cultural memory, diaspora studies, and film analysis.

This study's data gathering method is interpretive and textual, with an emphasis on the films as cultural artifacts. According to Creswell (2013), gathering qualitative data entails finding pertinent items, methodically arranging them, and deciphering their meaning. There are three steps in the process: first, watching and transcribing movies. The films are shown several times in order to become acquainted with the story, language, and cultural meanings. Transcripts and classifications are made of important conversations, particularly those that involve bilingual or multilingual interactions. Second, recognizing cultural allusions scenes including cultural indicators, including myths, gestures, symbols, rituals, and language usage, are recognized. The relationship between these allusions and identity and memory is noted. Third, contextual reading. The scenes are set in the larger Asian-American diasporic sociocultural milieu. Books and journal papers are used as secondary sources to compare interpretations to previous research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language as Repository of Cultural Memory

Language serves as a storehouse of cultural memory in addition to being a tool for communication (Assmann, 2011). Bilingualism and multilingualism become areas of cultural negotiation in diasporic situations, when memories of the homeland are

contested, modified, or retained. Language acts as a mediator between generations in *The Farewell*. Raised in the United States, Billi finds it difficult to express her feelings in Mandarin. Her partial detachment from Chinese cultural memory is symbolized by this language barrier. For instance, Billi frequently pauses or code-switches during interactions with her grandmother (Nai Nai), demonstrating her fractured sense of cultural belonging. Here, assimilation in the United States can impair access to ancestral memory, as seen by the connections between language loss and cultural loss (Tseng, 2020).

In *Minari*, on the other hand, Korean is always spoken in the Yi family's home, even though the kids speak English outside. The parents' deliberate efforts to preserve cultural memory and pass on tradition across generations are seen in their emphasis on speaking Korean. The children's reactions, which range from accepting to resistant, show the conflict between cultural preservation and assimilation. This supports the notion put out by Assmann (2011) that deliberate transmission techniques, including language preservation, are necessary for cultural memory. Therefore, *Minari* depicts cultural memory as robust, albeit constantly negotiated in the diasporic context, whereas *The Farewell* depicts it as delicate and threatened by language degradation.

Cultural Rituals and Symbolism as Memory Practices

Myths, symbols, and rituals are frequently used as mnemonic devices to maintain cultural memory (Assmann, 2011). Both movies emphasize the importance of cultural customs and rituals in forming one's identity. In *The Farewell*, the family fabricates a wedding feast to conceal their collective misrepresentation of Nai Nai's condition. Despite its apparent deceit, this ceremony embodies the Confucian concept of sheltering the elder from mental anguish, which is a collectivist ideal. Chinese principles of communal duty and family unity are thus recalled through the wedding rite, which turns into an act of cultural memory (Chow, 2021). The movie shows how, even in diasporic contexts, rituals function as dynamic practices of cultural memory that mold group identity.

Minari relies heavily on symbolism. *Minari*, a water celery native to Korea that grows well in a variety of conditions, is a symbol of the flexibility and tenacity of Korean culture. This cultural icon serves as a metaphor for Asian-Americans' hybrid identity, which is anchored in tradition but flexible enough to adapt to new environments, in

addition to tying the family to their own country Kim (2021). Elders serve as cultural bearers, and the grandmother's involvement in planting and caring for minari serves as another example of how memory is passed down through generations. Both films demonstrate how diasporic families rely on cultural traditions to preserve memory continuity despite displacement by contrasting ritual and symbolism.

Negotiation of Identity

Cultural memory is constantly being recreated through intergenerational interaction, according to Assmann (2011). The movies show that connections between parents, children, and elders are where identity negotiation is most evident. Nai Nai is portrayed in *The Farewell* as the living repository of Chinese cultural memory. She maintains the customs of family duty and collectivism, whereas Billi represents the hybrid identity influenced by Western individualism. The struggle between assimilation and memory is dramatized by their interaction. For example, Nai Nai herself supports the concealment as a component of cultural norms, even as Billi challenges the ethics of lying about her condition. Western and Eastern ideals clash among family structures in diasporic groups, a phenomenon called as "ethical dissonance," which is reflected in this struggle (Liu, 2020).

The grandmother (Soon-ja) in *Minari* serves as a cultural link. The youngsters tease her unusual behavior at first, including her food and dialect, but in the end, her presence reinforces their Korean identity. As the youngest son, David, develops a link with his grandma via shared experiences, the movie implies that identity is actively negotiated through real contact rather than passively inherited. The intergenerational dialogue emphasizes the elders' role in passing down cultural memory, reiterating Assmann's (2011) assertion that family communication is how memory is maintained. Younger generations reinterpret ancestral memory in light of their diasporic reality, therefore portraying identity creation as a process of tension and reconciliation in both films.

Identity Confusion and Hybridity

Conflicting cultural frameworks leading to identity confusion is a common issue in Asian-American tales (Hall, 1996). In both movies, hybridity is portrayed as a gift and a burden. Billi's identity dilemma in *The Farewell* is exacerbated by her experiences of estrangement in the US and alienation in China. The traditional diasporic double consciousness is embodied by her being both "too Chinese" for America and "too American" for China (Du Bois, 1994). However, because of her liminality, she is able to mediate between cultures, which reflects Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where hybrid identities produce new cultural meanings.

The composite identity of the *Minari* family is more about adaptation than it is about confusion. Through farming in particular, the Yi family balances American pragmatism with Korean tradition. The prospect of hybrid survival is symbolized by their choice to plant Korean veggies in American soil. The family welcomes hybridity as resilience rather than rejecting either culture. Thus, the two films show distinct reactions to hybridity: *The Farewell*, which is characterized by existential strain, and *Mini*, which is characterized by adaptive resilience. The range of identity negotiation in Asian-American cultural memory is demonstrated by them collectively.

The Relation to Cross-Cultural Studies

This study advances knowledge of the role diasporic narratives plays as cultural texts by examining *The Farewell* and *Minari* using Assmann's paradigm for cultural memory. They prove that language functions as a medium of cultural memory that is both robust and delicate, traditions are maintained through rituals and symbols even in the face of dislocation, interactions between generations are important venues for identity negotiation and memory transfer, hybridity shapes many forms of Asian-American identity and is both a problem and a resource. This is consistent with research on diasporic cultural memory (Erll, 2011; Rigney, 2012), which demonstrates that cultural identity is a dynamic reconstruction rather than a static inheritance. Therefore, Asian-American films function as cultural archives that mediate memory, identity, and belonging in addition to being entertaining.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the theoretical framework of Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory, this study looked into *The Farewell* (2019) and *Minari* (2020), paying special emphasis to how language, rituals, intergenerational dynamics, and hybridity construct cultural identity in diasporic environments. Both movies provide insightful examinations of Asian-American lives, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities of intercultural coexistence.

First, language is a crucial location for cultural memory, as the investigation showed. As linguistic relationships deteriorate over generations, Billi's inability to completely express herself in Mandarin in *The Farewell* highlights the vulnerability of cultural memory. *Minari* highlights language retention as a deliberate cultural preservation strategy, citing the Yi family as an example, who maintain Korean in their home despite interacting with English-dominated settings. Collectively, these movies show how language is used in diasporic identity creation as a coping mechanism and as a symbol of loss. Second, cultural traditions are maintained via the mnemonic anchors that rituals and symbols provide. The planting of minari in *Minari* represents diasporic adaptability and persistence, whereas the fictitious wedding feast in *The Farewell* emphasizes the collectivist ideals of filial obligation. Deeply ingrained in memory, these cultural practices demonstrate how communities adapt their legacy to endure relocation.

Third, the primary means of cultural transmission turns out to be intergenerational interactions. In both movies, elders, grandmothers in particular, serve as living repositories of cultural memory. These interactions, however, are rarely smooth; they entail compromise, opposition, and ultimately reconciliation. The clash between Eastern collectivism and Western individuality is portrayed in *The Farewell* through Billi's moral struggle with Nai Nai. In *Minari*, the grandmother acts as a mediator between the children's American upbringing and Korean customs, illustrating how identity is actively created through intergenerational communication. Fourth, the study emphasized hybridity as a resource and a challenge. *Minari* uses the image of Korean vegetables growing on American soil to illustrate hybridity as resilience and adaptability, in contrast to *The Farewell*, which depicts hybridity as a place of estrangement and double consciousness.

These opposing portrayals imply that hybrid identity depends on how memory, family, and cultural practices are managed rather than being fundamentally empowering or destructive.

From a wider angle, this comparative analysis shows how diasporic narratives serve as archives of cultural memory, which advances cross-cultural literary and film studies. They demonstrate that memory is a living, dynamic process influenced by language, ritual, and intergenerational communication rather than a static heritage. Asian-American movies thus provide important insights into how communities recall, rethink, and rebuild identity in the face of displacement and migration. Lastly, this study emphasizes how Assmann's (2011) approach is still applicable to comprehending cultural memory in diasporic media. The notion that cultural memory is maintained not just via historical records but also through customs, family relationships, and creative representations is best illustrated by *The Farewell* and *Minari*. They encourage audiences to consider the difficulties of assimilation, the intricacies of belonging, and the lasting value of cultural legacy in forming identity over time.

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