
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Contesting Asian-American Identity in Selected Digital Literature Works

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| ABSTRACT

The rapid movement and changes in technology have brought great transformations in many aspects. It does not only affect how people live but also their ways of thinking and perceptions. Almost all aspects are transformed into digital, and one of them is literature. The digitalization of literature has used various media, features, and forms. It is also widely known that digital literature has gained popularity nowadays. Teens today spend more time using their gadgets to access online platforms that are visually more appealing than the traditional version. For young people, who mostly use social media in their daily life, digital literature gives them easier access and better visuals. On the other hand, most digital literature works are also free and easy to access. Since digital literature is closely related to young people's lives, many young writers use social media platforms to express their feelings. Thus, this paper aims to interrogate the issue of the search for identity that is faced by Asian-American teenagers, the impact of the predicament on them, and how they select their identity and define themselves. In investigating those problems, the researchers borrow five social media literature works, "Asian is not My Brand", "Snippets of Time", "Clay", "Not American Enough", and "Mocking an Asian Accent is Never Funny", that are taken from the @dearasianyouthliterature Instagram platform. This issue is important to be discussed because the works were written by Asian-American teenagers who experience stereotyping, predicament, and ambivalence. In unveiling the issue of identity, the researchers used descriptive qualitative study and documentation as the data collection method. In addition, Bhabha's theory on ambivalence, in-betweenness, third space, and hybridity was also used to illuminate the researchers in deconstructing the problem. From these two social media short stories, the researchers find that Asian-American teenagers have to face predicaments and dilemmas because they are seen as not Asian enough to be Asian, as well as not American enough to be American. Furthermore, the researchers discovered that Asian-American teenagers decide to voice the voiceless and embrace and celebrate their Asian-American identity. Lastly, these social media short stories have not been discussed widely by Indonesian researchers; thus, it is a good opportunity to have a scholarly discussion using social media literature works.

| KEYWORDS

Asian-American, Identity, Predicament, Digital Literature.

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1. Introduction

Identity is socially constructed and most developed in the ambivalent space due to a predicament. According to Stuart Hall (1989), identity is "a meeting point between several intersecting discourses. ...[Moreover], it is also the relationship of the Other to oneself". Therefore, through encounters with these cultures or daily life events, someone will find some ways to shape their identity. In this study, the researchers try to deconstruct the myth of the search for identity, which starts from these two questions: Who am I? What is the meaning of being a true Asian-American? Those are mostly asked by Asian-American teenagers who first experience the ambivalence and the predicament of being in between two cultures. This predicament and the oscillation to choose one identity are stunningly captured by two young Asian-American writers in the selected short stories. From the two stories, readers will find

how the characters have struggled with their Asian-American identity. Moreover, the state of belonging and non-belonging is illustrated by the writers who were born and raised in the United States.

The short stories are essential to be analyzed because only a few Indonesian researchers have widely used social media literature works as their objects of study. As a result, it is a great opportunity for the researchers to start and develop a scholarly discussion that focuses on the analysis of social media literature works. Digital literature work is a mix between digital technology and literature (Lollini & Rosenberg, 2015, p. 132). Additionally, Koskimaa (2007) mentions that digital literature is purposely made, created, and accessed digitally (p. 3). Nowadays, social media literature works are gaining popularity since the use of digital media and technology in literature has increased during Covid-19. Brameswari (2021) adds that social media literature works have become “the alternative reading source during the pandemic for they may help the teenagers to find the solutions to their problems, to communicate with their peers, and to give support to each other” (p. 20). Since the works can be found online, young digital natives can access them easily and freely. Furthermore, the researchers took the primary data from @dearasiayouthliterature to promote social media literature works to young Indonesian readers.

Since the pandemic occurred, @dearasiayouthliterature has been a platform that accommodates young Asian writers to publish their literary works. Through this medium, young writers may share their stories and problems and voice their untold feelings. @dearasiayouthliterature is a transformation in literature since young readers around the world can access and enjoy stories everywhere. Furthermore, social media is an effective platform that may help writers rapidly share their experiences and feelings as Asian Americans. The teenage writers mostly feel like outcasts and are never truly accepted in either community. Moreover, they have lived in an oscillation and are confused about their uniqueness and identity. Using social media, they may share stories and help others express and validate their feelings.

This topic is important to be discussed because the stories told by the authors are closely related to real events and debates in our society. Moreover, the stories also deconstruct the Asian-American stereotype as well as American identity narratives. From the short stories, readers may find the predicament of being Asian-American teenagers who have struggled to be accepted by their community. Furthermore, the real feelings of the Asian-American teenagers who are claimed to not be “American” enough and are blamed for having Asian backgrounds are also presented by the writers. The researchers argue that identity is a fundamental aspect of people’s life. The issue of identity construction and young people’s search for personal identity are things that are important to be discussed. It is for this reason that identity is fluid, and it may change through people’s social interactions or life events. Thus, this research is relevant to be conducted because Indonesian people can also learn from the events that happen in the short stories. Since Indonesia has various cultures, races, tribes, local languages, and traits, the issue discussed in this research may enlighten them during their identity formation process.

2. Literature Review

The issue of the search for identity is always interesting to be discussed, especially if the object of the study is in the form of digital literature. However, only a few previous researchers discuss social media literature and the stories from @dearasiayouthliterature. Thus, the reviews from previous research were chosen selectively. The first research was conducted by Bouchardon (2017). In “Towards a Tension-Based Definition of Digital Literature”, he states that digital literature is based on tensions between the story content and the medium through which it is authored and accessed. The word tension does not necessarily mean conflict. Instead, it is a creative tension between the story and how the reader “plays” or interacts with the story. Furthermore, he also focuses on one example, which is a borderline case, to identify some of the tensions which underlie and fertilize digital literature.

In the second research, Brameswari (2021) shows that literature works that were taken from Instagram and Twitter illustrate the main characters’ feelings during the Covid-19 pandemic. She also underlines how social media literature has become a medium for both readers and writers to share their feelings and give support to each other. The third study was written by Nomita Loktongbam (2012) that highlights the “experiences of Chinese Diaspora in America and how they are trapped between two worlds, alienated, experience the clash of cultures, and their journey in searching for identity as portrayed in *The Joy Luck Club*.” This study also reflects the difficulties faced by the older and younger generation of the diaspora. The study underlines that “the younger generation cannot solely embrace the new American customs and rejects the old Chinese traditions. They must reconcile the binary and make one’s peace with the old.

Departing from the previous studies, the researchers propose a study that employs theories on Digital Literature and Bhabha’s approach to investigate the problems faced by the main characters, their effects, and how Asian-American teenagers choose their identities. Of the three discussions, none of them specifically problematized young adults’ works which are in the form of digital literature and taken from social media. Besides, none also illustrates the children and young adults’ issues or any other current issues that problematize the identity formation journey of Asian-American teenagers. As a result, this investigation tries to fulfill

the niche that is still possible to be explored. In triggering the discussion, the previous studies will be used as a guideline and stepping stone to perceive this research's goals.

3. Methodology

This is a descriptive qualitative study that uses social media literature works as the object of the study. The social media literature works were taken from the @dearasianyouthliterature Instagram platform and can be accessed at www.dearasianyouth.org. The primary sources used are "Not American Enough" by Tiffany Fang and "Asian is not My Brand" by Feileen Li. To analyze the short stories, the researchers use journals, newspaper articles, and videos that are related to the issue discussed in this research. Before formulating research questions, the researchers conducted a close reading of the primary and secondary data. Next, the theory is used to illuminate the problem of identity searching and its effect on Asian-American teenagers in social media short stories. Finally, the result of the research is presented in the result and discussion part and later is summarized in the concluding section. Furthermore, the researchers also give some suggestions to future researchers in Indonesia.

4. Results and Discussion

The researchers argue that social media literature gives bigger opportunities for young writers to share their personal experiences, problems, and worries and even support each other through their stories. Social media platforms may also accommodate the needs of their users, especially the young digital natives. Moreover, Martinez and Morilla (2021) stress that social media offers two-way communication so that both writers and readers may have direct discussions about literary works. Hartmanová (2020) adds that social media literature gives collaboration and support to the people or communities whose stories are presented in the literary works. Furthermore, in the digital era, young writers tend to publish their works on various social media platforms since they are more effective, easy to access, and cheap.

One social media platform which accommodates young Asian writers to express their feelings and show their solidarity is @dearasianyouth literature. On this platform, the Asian-American teenagers mostly wrote about their experiences, problems as diasporas, and the issue of identity among the Asian-American communities. Moreover, in this section, the researchers want to highlight three points. They are the key issues that the Asian-American youths deal with, the impacts of the predicament on the main characters, and how the Asian-American teenagers define themselves and choose to react towards the issue.

4.1 Issues Faced by the Asian-American Teenagers

From the title of the short stories "Not American Enough", "Asian is not My Brand", "Mocking Asian Accent is Never Funny", "Snippets of Time", and "Clay", we can see the authentic problem faced by the main characters. The uncanny feelings for being in-between cultures were clearly illustrated by Tiffany Fang, Feileen Li, Joshlyn Khuu, Zoe Leonard, and Justin Torres in their short stories. Furthermore, the main characters also share their struggle to be accepted by the American communities and the blame for not being Asian enough. This condition is worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic, which raises the anti-Asian hate rate and violence (Abrams, 2021). As a result, this condition becomes a pitfall for Asian communities, which may put their lives in danger. Brameswari (2021) shows that Asian-American communities do not only get "racial slurs on their appearance, heritage, and history but also a threat of violence" (p. 15). Tiffany Fang (2021), in the first short story, also underlines how the Asian-American people are rejected by "those who are 'truly' American that in their eyes the Asian-American people do not belong to their country" (par. 3-4). This quotation shows that "the dominant power tries to maintain their power" (Said, 2003) and "label them as different, foreign, visitors, and even traitors" (Fang, 2021, par. 8). In line with Bhabha (1994), this stereotype is important in defining the dominant culture and maintaining the binary.

Stereotyping is dangerous, and it may create inequality for all. As quoted by Abrams (2019), Vivian Tseng describes that stereotype "dehumanizes people and prevents us from seeing them in their whole humanity". Not only inequality, but the Asian-Americans also have to fight the injustice and racism which they had experienced since when they were young. It can be seen when Asian-American kids are bullied by their friends for having slanted eyes, bringing weird-smelling food, or even the way they say English words.

That was, until that one kid...pointed to us and laughed at the way our faces looked. Until the ignorant white kid ran up to us with his friends and came up close to our faces, pulling their eyes back while screaming, "Ching chong, ching chong!"...Until that really nice classmate who wasn't so nice anymore after she scrunched her nose while making an offensive remark regarding the way our "weird" food smelled; Until our fellow peers eyed us in the corner when we wore our traditional Asian outfits on Culture Day. Until the boys and girls we wanted to be friends with mocked the way we pronounced English words because English was not our first language. (Fang, 2021, par. 13)

The excerpt above shows that the main character experiences racism due to her identity as Asian American. She elaborates on how her peers consistently attack her due to her looks, food, outfit, and accent when speaking English. The racial discrimination narrated

by the main character is also experienced by Mei-Ling Hopgood, who was adopted by a white couple. Hopgood (2021), in her National Geographic article, illustrates similar discrimination and treatment like the racial slurs given to her since she was young. Moreover, she also describes how her childhood nightmares have recently come alive during the outbreak.

The disheartening part is the fact that racial discrimination happens in our society and even at school--a place that is supposed to provide safety and equal opportunity for all youths. Reports mention that 16% of the racial hate incidents in 2020 were experienced by Asian Americans ages 12 to 20, and about 80% of them reported being bullied or verbally harassed at school (The Columbus Dispatch, 2021). It emphasizes that racism has become a mutual experience encountered by Asian American youths in their daily lives at school. In the other short story, "Snippets of Time", the Asian American main character also tells us about the same racist experience. During one of the school periods, the crowds mock her for her physical appearance as an Asian.

When recess rolls around, I wander about the playground for a few minutes before I finally work up the courage to ask a group of girls to join their game of handball.

"But you have funny eyes!" One of the girls laughs, and the rest join in. Everyone at my new school was equal parts perplexed and grossed out by my appearance.

I go home and burst into tears, begging my Mom to fix my squinty, hideous eyes. It takes everything within her not to cry with me. (Leonard, 2021, par. 6 - 8)

The two short stories imply that neither of the Asian American main characters reports racial harassment to the teachers or school authorities. The later main character even instead only goes home to cry to her mother, who "takes everything within her to not cry with her daughter" (Leonard, 2021, par. 8). It might be rather futile to file a report about the racial discrimination which these kids experienced, due to the familiar fact that Asian Americans voices tend to be left unheard, if not silenced (Ren, 2021). Bhabha (1994) further implies that, as one of the institutions dominated by the superiors, school is a space where dominant power is being exercised through the marginalization of the inferiors (p. 83). It inherits the nature of the state, government, and society which prioritize the interests of the dominant group (Bhabha, 1994, p. 87). Therefore, it is not peculiar for school institutions to purposely be deaf and blind towards the racism experienced by these "inferior" Asian American youths.

4.2 The Impacts of the Predicament

Meanwhile, to the main characters' extent, the experience of being exposed to racial remarks by school peers must have left a big wound in their hearts. This particular treatment can lead to depression and lower self-esteem (Abrams, 2019). As a result, the ambivalence that is experienced by the main characters is highlighted to see the effect of stereotypes that are given to Asian-American teenagers. Bhabha (1994) adds that these conditions are used to strengthen the superior's position (p. 37).

Similarly, an excerpt written by Feileen Li (2021) entitled "Asian is not My Brand" also discusses the ambivalence and oscillation situation of authentic and not-authentic that is experienced by the main character. The other stereotype given to the Asian-American is that they excel in Math or music, they are smart, nerdy, and successful, and sometimes it is used as a joke which can be seen in Li's "Asian is Not My Brand" and Khuu's "Mocking Asian Accent is Never Funny".

Jokes about my inherent ability to excel in math or achieve straight A's because I'm Asian are common. What is there to be hesitant about when I fit into the Asian stereotype perfectly? I get straight A's, I like Algebra, I cut my nails on the weekends for orchestra, and I attend bi-weekly Math Olympiad meetings. As if I'm that cheap red clay we use in art class, each passing day, I continue to mold myself to fit into their standards and image of a typical Asian (Li, 2021, par. 5)

I listen to my white classmate explain to me the idea of Asian privilege—to walk into a room full of Asians and assume that they are all smart, nerdy, and successful— and what can I say? (Li, 2021, par. 10).

However, although the stereotype seems to be a positive one, it kills the person's personality and potential. People see their success not because of their potential and achievement but because it is what is expected from an Asian. It can be seen from the evidence below.

I don't like it because who is my classmate to decide my potential? Who is he to tell me what is expected of me?

With a shaky sigh, I glance back down at my paper. The fat red "A+" and smiley face stared back at me as if mocking the invisible word "Asian" engraved on my head. (Li, 2021, par. 7-8)

Is it righteous that my success in school is attributed solely to my race? (Torres, 2021, par. 3)

The text above illustrates the stereotype given by non-Asian students. They believe that Asian-American students can get an A because they are Asians, not because they are capable of getting an A.

On the other hand, in Khuu's work, the main character first lets her white-American friends make a joke about her accent and her broken English because she wants to be accepted. Moreover, being caught between worlds has aroused the main character's feeling of wanting to be white. It is the reason that she is afraid of being different, and she also first thinks that it is a casual joke given by a friend. This can be verified in the following excerpt,

I yearned for the acceptance of my peers, wanting to consistently make sure that they liked me, and hoped that their validation would grant me the satisfaction and happiness that I had been craving for so long. (Khuu, 2021, par. 1)

The quotation above is in line with Bhabha's mimicry (1994, p. 85). The researchers argue that this is the way the main character's strategy toward the act of racism is given by her white-American friends. This condition is formed by the ambivalence condition when the Asian American stays between two cultures.

As a consequence, the stereotype given to Asian-American also leads to rejection from white Americans, who mostly treat them badly. The Asian communities are seen as those who must be responsible for the spread of the global pandemic. They are also seen as terrorists and those who steal white people's jobs (Fang, 2021, par. 3). It vilifies Asian Americans and further dismisses the community's challenges related to inequalities, such as poverty and hunger (U Mass Chan, 2022). During the pandemic, many Asian Americans are at risk of poverty and food insecurity as they have to face sudden mass unemployment (NBC News, 2021). Meanwhile, while challenging living conditions, they still have to experience daily fear due to the racial-based-violence which increases by up to 800 percent (Torres, 2021, par. 3). In many of these cases, women and elderlies become the victims of this violence occurring in public spaces, mostly perpetrated by the white Americans (Oregon Live, 2022).

The researchers argue that this predicament is rooted in the rejection by white Americans to maintain the binary to dominate the country and to show that they are more powerful than Asian Americans. It is in line with Said (2003), who states that the binary is important to be maintained so that the boundary between the white-Americans and the Asian-American is clear.

In fact, we are constantly asked where we came from, as if that is the only part of our identity that exists. "No, not where you were born. No, not where you grew up. No, not what school you went to," they retort after we respond with what we believe is correct. (Fang, 2021, par. 5)

"I mean, where did you come from? Where did your parents come from? What language do you speak?" (Fang, 2021, par. 6)

Due to the stereotype and the rejection from the white communities, the researchers claim that the main character in the short story is frustrated, depressed, and embarrassed about being different. The main character describes how frustrated she is because she is rejected and is not accepted in a country that she accepts without hesitation (Fang, 2021, par. 9). She is also depressed because she has to see how her parents also suffer. After all, they are outspoken. She then adds,

"she has struggled and still struggles with her identity, unsure of which parts of herself to reveal. It has been a constant battle with a country that shames her for being Asian but at the same time will never accept her no matter how American she acts, talks, or dresses" (Fang, 2021, par. 24).

Through the predicament felt by the main character, the researchers found that the search for an ideal identity resulted in the imitation of the white-American culture. The main character first tries to overcome the predicament and sadness as well as to deal with the identity struggle by mimicking the white Americans. She chooses to leave her Asian side and imitates the white-American culture. She dyes her hair blonde, watches Disney channel shows, or even wears a lighter foundation to keep her skin tone pale. The main character's personal experience highlights how cultural identity is manifested in the ambivalent space. In line with Bhabha (1994), the way the Asian-Americans embrace the white American culture is their effective strategy of colonial power and knowledge (p. 85). The power of social media and Eurocentric beauty standards has sunken their self-confidence. Many of them are still ashamed because of their physical differences, their difficult-to-pronounce Asian names, and their ancestors.

4.3 Asian-Americans' Reaction Toward the Issues

Based on the issues mentioned above, the main characters choose to use the third space to voice their wish for equality. Additionally, she also uses this room to choose her own identity without any disturbance from other parties. She argues that even though it is safe to remain silent, it is actually suffering, and she cannot live her life peacefully (Fang, 2021, par. 26). In the beginning, Asian-Americans' voice is ignored and forgotten, so they choose to remain silent (Fang, 2021, par. 10-15). Nevertheless, the main character decides to speak and wants to end the pain and silence (Fang, 2021, par. 28). Her struggle to voice the voiceless is a strategy to fight back against the ignorance and rejection from the white-American community. She chooses to define herself first and declare her identity as an Asian-American and ignore the others who define her. She insists that,

With the combination of both our origins and our current home, we are Asian, but we are also American. And we must be loud and proud. (Fang, 2021, par. 32)

No, I think, firmer, more assured in myself this time. I will no longer let their idea of Asian define me. I will define myself. I gently place my test in my backpack with a slight smile tugging at the corners of my mouth (Li, 2021, par. 24).

As also mentioned by Bhabha (1994), hybridity is a strategic inversion toward the oppression of the dominant power (p. 112). Hybridity is a combination of two different cultures and is a result of the rejection of the dominant power (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114). From the quotation above, we can see that the hybrid culture that is embraced by the main character is a combination between Asian culture and American culture. This hybrid culture is also her strategy to end the domination and the oppression which have lasted for generations. Additionally, she underlines that “she is Asian but also American. She is Asian-American, and she is American enough” (Fang, 2021, par. 35).

This hybrid culture, as embraced by the main character above, occurs in the what-so-called third space. Bhabha (1994) reveals that the third space is a peculiar mental space where two cultures are straddled, leading to the emergence of hybrid nature, which has the power to negotiate and resist superiors (p. 217). It is racism itself that opens this third space between the oppressors and the oppressed so that resistance can take place. For instance, the Asian American main character in “Clay” employs this peculiar third space to stand up against racism he experiences firsthand. He uses the special moment of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month to stand and speak about the ongoing discrimination that his community receives.

It’s a month of being loud and proud and celebrating my culture, despite all of the hands that try to deface, demean, and diminish it. It’s a month of growing into myself and finally living up to my name. While racism fosters division, pain, and hate, speaking out against it facilitates unity, healing, and love (Torres, 2021, par. 4)

The quotation above emphasizes the appropriation of racism happening in the third space. It is used to reconceptualize the power relations between races for the resistance of the oppressed (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38). The main character believes that racism which brings suffering, at the same time, has allowed a space for self-determination (to “unite, heal, and love”) for marginalized Asian Americans.

In addition, Joshlyn Khuu (2021) reminds her readers that we have allowed ourselves to be fooled and treated as less important. She illustrates that the main character realizes that letting herself be mocked is similar to mocking their parents. For as the first Asian-American generation, her parents have given their tears, sweat, and blood for their family. The main character says that she has been raised to love her culture, but racism has attacked her people and those who love her (Khuu, 2021, par. 5). Furthermore, the fear of prejudice must be erased, and all people must be treated better for everyone deserves equality. Lastly, the writer invites her readers to be proud of their Asian heritage and also embrace their Asian-American identity.

5. Conclusion

The expression of white racial superiority has been manifested in everyday life in American society. Moreover, racial microaggression in the United States seems quite effective in creating a stereotype that Asian Americans belong to a racial minority group—that they are deemed as inferior subjects. The impacts are quite serious that the racial prejudice and discrimination directed at the Asian-Americans have affected their self-esteem, social life, and psychological condition. At the beginning of the short stories, the main characters feel that they are not worthy of being part of the American community because of their Asian background. They all experience the constant external prejudices that are ended up as an internalized negative instrument—and it indeed affects how these Asian Americans construct perceptions about themselves and the society that induces those perceptions. Moreover, they also feel depressed because they are ignored and rejected for being Asian Americans, and they do not know how to identify themselves as Asians or as Americans; it is the ambivalent nature that contributes to the creation of anxiety within Asian Americans’ identity enunciation, particularly in the face of white Americans who tend to ignorantly dismiss, if not deride the in-between characteristic of certain groups.

However, in the end, the main characters decided to embrace and celebrate their Asian-American identity, proudly accept themselves, and love their uniqueness as Asian Americans. They flip the racial discrimination that they encounter into a positive trigger to stand up for themselves and further challenge racial hatred. Moreover, the main characters also encourage their fellow young generation of Asian Americans to speak up, stand up for themselves, and appreciate their uniqueness. They also want to tell their readers that they are not alone in their journey to finding their identity. Digital space, with its discursive characteristic, allows Asian-American youth to share their stories—where resistance towards white superiority and collective self-determination is made much more possible.

This study is subject to limitation due to the narrow characteristic of representations of Asian American youths in the selected digital literature in the year 2020 - 2021. To employ a deeper understanding of the minority's experience in the spatial context of America as reflected in literary texts, a further study that gathers corpus from the wider temporal scope is very much needed—to sharpen the analysis with the aspect of historicity. Furthermore, to fully read the complexities of white domination in American racial structure, the inclusion of other ethnicities' literature—Latin Americans', for instance—would create a more integral constellation.

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