

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Culture is the treasure of every ethnic community that characterizes the identity of its people. Culture is described as a collection of people's widely held ideas, values, and norms (Northouse, 2015). Culture relates to a person's way of life. According to Sewell (2023) culture is the entirety of human-constructed and generationally transmitted behaviours, beliefs, institutions, myths, and other practices. This comparison suggests that culture, like nature, separates humans from other animals (Sewell, 2023). Culture also provides the context in which individuals grow and develop from childhood to adulthood. It must be recognized that in a wider society, cultural differences are unavoidable. Positively, this diversity adds beautiful variety to society. However, many people feel that their culture becomes a burden when they are within their community or interacting with different cultures.

Not only culture, but also a person's personal life experiences within their family or environment, shape and develop different personalities in each individual. This leads to varied mindsets and perspectives. Someone who has endured bitter and violent experiences in the family may find it difficult to get along with, be closed off to others, be quick to think negatively about situations, and tend to overthink and compare themselves negatively to others.

Differences in culture, life experiences, and perspectives lead to varied feelings among people in a diverse community. When properly managed, diversity can serve as a positive opportunity, but it can also pose challenges in social relations. Some of these differences cause conflicts because individuals cannot accept each other, and give a sense of superiority to certain ethnicities. Naturally, some individuals or groups will be marginalized or feel alienated.

People who are marginalized within a community because of their differences may feel alienated. As Grodzins describes, alienation is the state where individuals

feel they do not belong to their community or nation. Personal relationships are often unstable and unfulfilling (Grodzins, 1956, cited in Nettler, 1957).

In postcolonial analysis, alienation is often discussed as part of cultural issues. Edward Said (1979) explains that in Orientalism, only Westerners can speak about Easterners, just as white people can label and identify people of colour or non-white individuals. Every statement made by Orientalists or white people carries an unavoidable sense of detachment that separates them from people of colour (Said, 1979). It is understandable that domination over Eastern people leads to feelings of separation and distinction. This can foster a sense of being 'othered' and cause the feeling of alienation. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) also explains that Sartre says the anti-Semitic consciousness revolves around the idea of man as his alienated image; not Self and Other, but the otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity (Bhabha, 1994). Domination over a community can cause people to feel alienated and afraid of freedom. They may only follow the dominant group and begin to lose their sense of belonging to their own community. This results in feelings of alienation and being 'othered', especially since the dominant group also rejects them.

Many prominent writers have produced some of the best literary works on the topic of alienation due to the challenges faced as a diaspora. For example, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and other writers have encountered many of the problems stemming from cultural differences, self-identity, and perspective, based on their personal experiences in the past. Cultural differences, self-identity, and perspective become obstacles for them in building communication with the surrounding community.

In Limbo, Deborah Jung-Jin Lee's best work, Deborah recounts her high school years and her struggles with alienation as a diaspora. Released in 2023, *In Limbo* received the Asian Pacific American Literary Award for Young Adult Honor Book in 2024. The book uses the graphic memoir format and features dark blue and white colors, reflecting Deborah's sadness that inspired its creation. Deborah Jung-Jin Lee had a different experience as a diaspora writer from Korea. She writes her best literary works from her personal experiences. Deborah faced several challenges,

such as identity crises and social alienation, stemming from her appearance and background as an Asian woman. Deborah grew up as a diasporic Korean woman who was not fluent in Korean, which caused her to experience ongoing identity conflicts and feelings of alienation from her ethnicity. Erik Erikson (1968) explains that young people often face identity crises and confusion. A state of acute identity confusion typically appears when a young person faces a mix of experiences that require simultaneous commitments: physical intimacy (not always overtly sexual), making important career decisions, engaging in energetic competition, and defining their psychosocial identity (Erikson, 1968). The identity confusion can be seen through Deborah's teenage years, which were filled with tough and difficult experiences, including feeling disconnected from society because of her Asian background.

She continuously faces challenges, not only in society, where some people bully her or judge her with a stereotypical Asian perspective, for example, having small eyes, possessing Asian facial features, or mocking the Chinese language. She also did not have many friends, and when her friends started to get busy relating to others, Deborah was left alone in her loneliness and isolation. The disconnection she felt from society pushed her further into a sense of alienation. It was not only problems with society that she faced, but also within the family, where her mother practiced tiger parenting. According to Kobakhidze et al (2023) tiger parenting is generally used to refer to an intensive parenting style, where parents plan and closely monitor almost every aspect of their children's lives (Kobakhidze et al., 2023). Deborah experienced rejection and oppression in her life. Deborah could not accept her mother's continuous harsh behavior towards her, yet she could not change the situation. Deborah also cannot accept her identity as an Asian person, which causes her to feel alienated. All these circumstances affected her mentality and led her to have suicidal thoughts.

In her despair, Deborah began to learn how to see what she still could do for her own life. Family circumstances involving her mother's parenting, which she could not control to her satisfaction, along with her identity as a Korean woman, a diaspora, and feeling alienated from any community, surrounded her and shaped

her mentality. Deborah learns to accept what she cannot change and tries to change what she can. She attempts to see the other side of her world, recognizing that she is not alone. She decided to accept her mother's strict parenting and attitude, but she changed her appearance as a Korean woman to better showcase her identity. Henry Winthrop (1967) describes existentialism as a task of disalienation, similar to how Sartre discusses a person's essence. One way to achieve this is by developing a coherent personal identity, avoiding incompatible fragments. This involves abandoning certain old roles, adopting new ones, and expanding our behavioral repertoire to include postures and activities that reflect our evolving self-understanding (Winthrop, 1967).

Deborah did not drown in her despair; instead, she rose from it because of her desire to step out of her comfort zone. Deborah was experiencing self-detachment due to confusion about what she truly desired in her activities. She ultimately regained her power and did something she truly wanted by going to the drawing class. She was also uncertain about what she should believe or how she should act regarding societal norms and rules. According to Melvin Seeman (1959) meaninglessness occurs when a person is unsure of what they should believe. When their minimum requirements for decision-making clarity are not met, we might describe this as feeling meaningless (Seeman, 1959). But she also tries something to overcome her feelings of meaninglessness by changing her appearance and establishing a clearer identity. Therefore, by regaining the essence of her life, she can overcome the alienation and struggles she faces. This becomes the key point where she begins to rise up.

What struggles does Deborah face as a Korean-American immigrant? This is something that needs further understanding and analysis. To understand the challenges and obstacles faced by immigrants throughout their migration to other countries. Additionally, how does she cope with her sense of alienation so she can move out of her despair? Because, in reality, not everyone can do what Deborah did. So, this can serve as an answer for someone who has experienced similar struggles.

The discrimination and exclusion Deborah faced caused her to feel alienated. This is the main issue that she wants to explore more deeply. Her experiences in high school as an Asian immigrant in America show how Asians experienced discrimination and were stereotyped as a single race. Asia is a vast and diverse cultural community. There are also some physical and cultural similarities among Asians. These similarities exist, but they do not mean they are the same. The message that Deborah tries to convey is an interesting subject that will make a valuable contribution to people who feel alienated.

It is not only Deborah's struggles that make this book interesting to analyze further. The format of the book, which is a graphic memoir, also makes it compelling to examine. Banks (2020) explains that graphic memoirs, also known as graphic nonfiction, push traditional boundaries as a medium that gives voice to personal stories and ultimately reveals the truth about the world we live in (Banks, 2020). A graphic memoir is a type of nonfiction sequential art that centers on personal experience or story as its main focus. Using visual storytelling enhances Deborah's narrative and fosters an emotional connection. As Nancy Pedri (2015) states, changes in visual perspective can influence how we understand a character's subjective experience of events, and they can also be used to create different narrative effects (Pedri, 2015). It can be seen that visual narratives also help readers build emotional attachment to stories. The visualization of main characters will also influence different understandings of the narrative. This is a positive aspect of graphic memoirs, where the visualization of characters can help readers develop greater creative thinking.

El Refaie (2014) explains Ronald Carter's argument that suggests metaphorical creativity involves discovering new connections between two areas of experience and imaginatively reinterpreting conventional metaphors. However, to be considered truly creative, new metaphors must align with our basic experiences and be appropriate to the medium and context of communication (El Refaie, 2014). Using experience and imaginative visualization makes graphic memoirs more effective at expressing emotions. Graphic memoir is also a form of sequential art that combines words and images as the main focus to convey the writer's ideas. As

explained by Eisner (1985) the comic book format blends words and images, necessitating that readers engage both visual and verbal interpretive skills. Elements of art such as perspective, symmetry, brush strokes, and literary aspects like grammar, plot, and syntax intersect. Reading a comic is thus both an aesthetic experience and an intellectual exercise (Eisner, 1985). Eisner also explains that sequential art uses expressive anatomy such as posture, gesture, facial expression, and framing to help focus on the character's body or facial expression (Eisner, 1985). Graphic memoirs provide visualization similar to comics and other sequential arts, which also attract young adults to read the book. According to Kennedy (2019) there are more graphic novels like *Rapunzel's Revenge* for kids than graphic memoirs. A good graphic memoir for middle-grade readers (ages 9-12) is *Little White Duck: A Childhood in China*, by Na Liu and Andres Vera Martinez. The mix of words and images makes graphic memoirs appealing, and this one is especially well done (Kennedy, 2019). *In Limbo* received the Asian Pacific American Literary Award for Young Adult Honor Book in 2024. It is shown that graphic memoir is also part of young adult literature.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The research aims to find answers to the following question:

1. What are the struggles Deborah faced as a Korean American immigrant?
2. How does she deal with her feelings of alienation?
3. What is the message about alienation in this graphic memoir?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. The purpose of this study is to examine Deborah's struggle to understand the struggles of the Korean American immigrant.
2. To understand how Deborah managed her struggles and alienation as a Korean American diaspora.

3. To understand the message the graphic memoir conveys about alienation through Deborah's story.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Analyzing the struggles immigrants encounter, such as Deborah's, can enhance our comprehension of the challenges diaspora communities confront. Furthermore, understanding the struggles of immigrants enables us to appreciate better the feelings of alienation they frequently experience, as these issues are integral to their recurring experiences.

Understanding the barriers faced by immigrants, such as those experienced by Deborah, offers valuable insights for diaspora communities. By recognizing these challenges, we can develop support systems and resources aimed at overcoming feelings of alienation and fostering a stronger sense of belonging to their own culture. This knowledge can lead to practical solutions that empower immigrants, strengthen relationships within their communities, and help them navigate their journey more effectively.

1.5 Methodology of the Study

This research will employ a descriptive qualitative method. This research uses the graphic memoir *In Limbo* (2023) as the primary data source for analysis. This method will analyze the findings from the book *In Limbo* and interpret them to answer the research questions. A close reading will be conducted to analyze the graphic memoir, aiming to identify the struggles that led Deborah to deep alienation. The identified struggles will then be categorized into dimensions of alienation to understand better the indicators of alienation experienced by Deborah. After identifying these struggles, the researcher will examine how Deborah overcame her feelings of alienation by analyzing the indicators within the dimensions of alienation. Ultimately, by understanding both the struggles and her responses, the researcher will seek to uncover the underlying message about alienation that this graphic memoir intends to convey.

I.6 Scope of the Study

The limitations of this research pertain to the challenges experienced by Deborah as a member of the diaspora and a second-generation immigrant. Additionally, the study examines Deborah's interactions with her environment, including her mother and friends. This study will examine how these struggles contribute to her alienation, drawing on relevant theories from prominent literary figures to understand her experiences better. Also limiting the focus on the dimension of alienation to observe Deborah's struggles and what causes her to feel alienated. The limitation on visualization interpretation for Deborah will also extend to her expressive anatomy, such as gesture, posture, and facial expression. It will also impact other elements of sequential art, such as panelization and framing.

I.7 Status of the Study

This research explores the themes of diaspora and alienation in Deborah J.J. Lee's *In Limbo* (2023), focusing on the challenges faced by the main character, a Korean-American immigrant. It draws upon previous studies to highlight the broader context of alienation in diaspora literature. Shukla and Banerji (2014) examine themes of "alienation" and "assimilation" in the works of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, showing how immigrants struggle with identity and belonging in a globalized world. Bhardwaj's (2022) research explores the sense of alienation and cultural conflict in Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine*. The novel follows an undocumented woman and widow, Jasmine, as she navigates the challenges of acculturation to American culture, including cultural loss and identity search. Alienation is a significant issue in diasporic literature, impacting aspects like the generation gap, the anti-war movement, the hippie phenomenon, the credibility gap, and the lack of meaningful life. Mukherjee's novels often depict the complexities of immigrant life, with characters struggling to redefine values and identity in a rapidly changing world. The novel serves as a cultural bridge, presenting the disturbed life of transient characters.

The identification of previous research demonstrates that individuals in the diaspora frequently encounter significant challenges, often resulting in feelings of

rootlessness and confusion regarding their identities. This highlights the difficulties faced by diaspora communities, who may find themselves unsupported by the societies they inhabit. Similarly, the theme presented in *In Limbo* illustrates the struggles diaspora individuals endure as they attempt to integrate into different cultural contexts. The differences that will be examined in this research are to see perspectives on how Korean Americans experience alienation. In addition, to identify the triggers and causes of the alienation experienced by the main character. As in this research using the graphic memoir that based on a true event.

I.8 Organization of the Study

This *skripsi* is organized as follows:

Chapter I is the introduction, which covers research background, problem formulation, research objectives, research significance, research methodology, scope and limitation, research status, and research organization.

Chapter II reviews related literature and covers the theory and theme that will be explored. This part will discuss the graphic novel, the Korean American diaspora, and Alienation.

Chapter III is the findings and discussion, which presents the results of this study. It formulates research problems in accordance with the theory used by the present writer.

Chapter IV is the conclusions and Suggestions, in which the writer presents conclusions and suggestions after conducting research on the graphic memoir. This chapter outlines the conclusions regarding what is discussed in this paper.