

THE MAIN CHARACTER'S IDENTITY IN *HIROMI'S HAND* BY LYNNE BARASCH

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ABSTRACT

The research entitled "The Main Character's Identity in *Hiromi's Hand* by Lynne Barasch." The main reason the writer chose this topic is that the main character of picture books has serious identity problems. In particular, Hiromi wants to know more about her own identity as a descendant of Japanese-American immigrants. What makes Hiromi unique is that she was born and raised when her parents immigrated to the United States of America, so despite being of immigrant descent, she has been automatically in the American environment since childhood. Hiromi's first problems involved the process by which immigrant children making the transition, making the connection, and becoming American. The writer uses the identity theory of (FU, Lamme, & Lowery, 2004); (Serpe & Stets, 2016), starting that the second problems are internal issues such as thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and external issues are social problems. The objectives of the study to examine this problem is to describe the process of identity that Hiromi experienced so that she become American and to explain how Hiromi solved the identity problem. The method use in this research is descriptive qualitative and uses a mimetic approach. The source of the data is Hiromi's picture book, and the data use the text and pictures in the picture book. As a result, it is revealed that Hiromi has a dual identity as a Japanese American girl. Hiromi is physically of Japanese descent but socially American, Hiromi eventually becomes comfortable and prefers being American.

Keywords: Picture book, Identity, Multicultural literature, Asian-American immigrant, American and Japanese Culture

INTRODUCTION

In this research, the writer analyzed a picture book entitled *Hiromi's Hand* (Barasch, 2007). Barasch is the author of this book. According to Encyclopedia.com (Barasch, Lynne 1939–, 2019), she was born on March 23, 1939, in New York City. She is a children's book author and illustrator. She wrote many picture books, including *Hiromi's Hand*, based on the true story of Hiromi's life journey as a descendant of immigrants and one of New York's first female sushi chefs. Barasch first saw Hiromi Suzuki, a kindergarten friend of her son's five years old, as a shy person. The picture book not only talked about Hiromi's life but also about Hiromi's parents.

In short, *Hiromi's Hand* talks about Asian-American immigrants in children's picture books. The writer chose this book because the main character is impressive to the writer. Hiromi is the main character of this book. Her father Akira Suzuki and her mother Kaoru Suzuki are native Japanese, but Hiromi was born and raised in America. The picture book explains that when Hiromi was eight years old. She began to wonder about her identity. The conflict in this story is the inner conflict that Hiromi experienced when she was studying in the American school, Hiromi was studying American culture and socializing with American classmate, but on Saturday Hiromi was also attending a Japanese school. She studied Japanese culture, wrote Japanese, and got socialized with a child of Japanese descent like her. Even though Hiromi was born and raised in America, she feels different from her friends because it's not certain that her friends experience the same as Hiromi like going to school in two places every week.

The writer's interest in *Hiromi's Hand* picture book is Hiromi's identity, because in the story even though Hiromi was born in America, her parents still teach Hiromi Japanese culture, such as celebration ceremonies that are generally carried out by Japanese people. Hiromi gladly accepted when her mother taught her about Japanese culture even though she is living in America. The fact that Hiromi was born in America, but her parents are immigrants, automatically inherited her parental identity to Hiromi. It's a different story if Hiromi refuses what her mother teaches it will be a big problem and add to the conflict that occurs. Hiromi also studied at a Japanese school in America, it is clear from this the community is still trying to maintain Japanese culture and

inevitably Hiromi mingles with her friends. So, Hiromi's identity is dual, and the writer is very interested in analyzing Hiromi's identity.

Asian-American is a group of people who come from Asia or were born in America but of Asian/mixed parents from both countries. Although they move and live in the same destination country, they have in their country of origin, culture, language, and story. Their goals are different for individual, one of which is the economic problems of finding a decent job, while for people who have educated or middle class, the purpose of migrating there is to do business and some have problems with their families and their former environment, so they have move countries. The majority and minority of society can be visible from various perspectives. If viewed from the perspective of American citizenship, even as an immigrant country, various nations that come and live there are mixed into one doesn't mean that the law, the pattern changed of native American society because of the migration. America remains a liberal country, every individual is guaranteed the freedom to do whatever they want. The culture of the immigrant who came to America and lived there, the American government was asked not to leave its culture and remain which is why America is a multicultural country. America also supports immigrant children to maintain their original culture by building schools in America, for example, schools in Japan, China, Korea, and other Asian countries because with the support at the school, they can learn with friends from the same community, get to know general characteristics of the culture, as well as the values of that culture.

Identity is an acknowledgment. Everyone needs an identity, especially an immigrant because to take care of correspondence and important documents. According to Probyn (1996, as cited in Sumara, 1998) "...suggests that identity is continually shaped and transformed as the surface relations of experience shift. This means that things like climate, geography, housing, sociality, modes of transportation, and access to resources all contribute to the *ongoing* production of identity". Because identity is fluid, not fixed, depending on the situation and condition in which we live. Identity is formed cumulatively from time to time, through events and experiences. Identity is not only about where we come from, or the color of our skin, but what is inside us to understand of the world based on experience. Therefore, identity is needed for immigrants to live more comfortably in a new environment.

To analyze this book, the writer used the identity theory from Stets and Serpe "...the first strand of identity theory focuses on the first of Mead's fronts: the relationships between social structures and identities. These structures may be large (economic, kinship, ethnic, etc.), intermediate (schools, neighborhoods, etc.), or small (families, primary groups, social networks)" Stryker, Serpe and Hunt (2005, as cited in Serpe & Stets, 2016). From this explanation of Mead's theory of identity, he explained that there are two important aspects, internal and external issues. The internal issue of identity refers to thoughts, feelings, and emotions of individual that make up the self, evolving, stabilizing, and changing in interaction with society. At the same time, in external issue affairs, development, stability, and change are the process from community to individual formation.

There are 3 general stages experienced by immigrant children. According to (FU, Lamme, & Lowery, 2004) "...we categorize the general experiences in the book into 3 main themes: Making the transition, Making the connection, and Becoming American". Many immigrant children have problems when learning about new environments and friendships. When at school they are not confident because they feel different from their friends, they are afraid of bullying from their friends, intimidation, and discrimination because they don't know each other. Even though Hiromi was born in America and has American friends, it is possible for Hiromi to go through a process of knowing more about her identity, because when Hiromi thought her friends are different, for example, her eyes are slanted, her skin color is not the same, and differences other physical, of course, Hiromi will ask when at home to her parents about them.

There are many books from experts on Asian-American immigrants, but the writer prefers to take the references from Ronald Bayor regarding multicultural America. The explanation in the book is very complete and easy to understand about immigrants from various countries who have migrated to America. Immigrants face many challenges in their new environment, including culture, language, laws, race, and ethnic differences. As explained in the introduction to Bayor's book, "...it is well known that America is a nation of immigrants, but less understood are the patterns, laws, and effects of that immigration" (Bayor, 2011). Immigrants are forced to learn to know their new environment and live socially with the surrounding community, even though they have different identities, they can mingle together.

The cultural differences experienced by Hiromi will not change anything. In her native country, she has an identity as a Japanese girl. In America, the identity has developed not only by Japanese girls but also by Japanese American girls. This identity is limitless and will continue to grow throughout her life.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, a descriptive qualitative method is used to analyze the picture book and the writer specific use mimetic approach. The mimetic approach was used in this picture book research. According to **Abrams** (as cited in Anonymous, 2013), the mimetic approach is a literary work that is a reflection of real life, meaning that the author's words must be a portrait of the life or nature he sees. Since there are numerous cases of Asian-American immigrants in the real world, the picture book about immigrant children is not just fiction. The data are based on a literature review by the writer. The explanations are in the form of words and pictures not in the form of numbers.

The writer in analyzing the picture book needs a research procedure, this is an important thing to facilitate so that the research can be focused and structured. Here are the steps:

1. Collect materials from the history and literature on America and Japanese culture.
2. Identify issues in picture books that relate to identity.
3. Categorize and group identity related phrases and images.
4. Analyze based on identity theory.
5. Conclude from the analysis results.

DISCUSSION

In this part, the writer analyzes the character of Hiromi in *Hiromi's Hand*. The writer describes Hiromi's adaptation when she is in her new environment as well as American schools and Japanese schools in America. Even though Hiromi was born in America, she did not rule out the possibility that Hiromi had problems with the American environment. The picture book *Hiromi's Hand* is told from a first-person perspective, namely Hiromi. The theory used for analyzing based on what Hiromi

experienced in an American environment. The writer begins the analysis by observing the internal issues experienced by Hiromi, i.e. emotions, thoughts, and feelings as a child of immigrant descent. External issues include feedback or responses for other people to Hiromi's presence in an American environment. There must be recognition and a process of mutual acceptance by one another to be part of a social group.

a. Adapting stages in Hiromi's Hand

Hiromi's first time in Japan when Hiromi was eight years old. it seems that Hiromi is very enthusiastic about her trip to Japan. Hiromi sees that the cultural differences between America and Japan are very different. Hiromi thought and compared it.

Grandmother said, "*if papa is a man and a woman can't be a sushi chef in Japan*".

In public places, especially in markets, there are rarely women and most men. Grandmother said, "people thought a woman's soft, warm hands would spoil the fish. Besides, tradition dictated that a woman's place was at home. She ate after her husband finished his meals, and when they went out, she walked behind him. Hiromi was confused and surprised because, during her time living in America, she had never seen such a thing happen.

The first time Hiromi's father goes to America, her father felt the same shock as Hiromi when she first came to visit Japan. In Figure 4, there are lots of women in public places, different from Japan, women were everywhere, in the streets, on subways, in the shops, and working in offices. It was "ladies first", there were big cars, big portions, big opportunities, said Hiromi's father. In America, women are more prioritized than in Japan.

Hiromi's father worked at the Kamehachi sushi restaurant in America and after 3 years worked there. Hiromi's father opened his restaurant called Akasaka. That restaurant is where her father and mother met for the first time. At that time, Hiromi's father's friend came to visit the restaurant with her mother, named Kaoru. Kaoru is also a Japanese immigrant living in America just like her father. They introduced themselves to each other, and eventually, they fell in love and decided to get married.

Process transition that occurred in Hiromi's life began when Hiromi was an adult and began to think. Papa and Mama finally decided to get married and live in America until they had children.

Hiromi said, *"I grew quickly into a sturdy, happy little girl"*.

Hiromi grew up happily in a Japanese American immigrant family. Hiromi experienced a transition when she was at home with her Japanese immigrant parents and when she left the house because she was in American society.

Hiromi said, *"All week I went to school with my friends. Then on Saturday I went to Japanese school. I learned to read and write Japanese. I learned about Japanese traditions"*.

It is interesting Hiromi's story because even though her parents taught her about Japanese traditions at home, she still preserves and respects Japanese culture by attending Japanese schools. Every year Hiromi and her family also celebrate Japanese traditions, every February they celebrate Setsuban, which is the day before the first day of spring comes by cleaning the apartment and then sowing beans outside the house with the reason to get rid of evil things and becoming happier.

Hiromi said, *"I respected the old customs and traditions of Japan, but I also wanted to be like my friends. We were in America. Japan was far away"*.

From the statement above, it is explained that Hiromi wants to be like American children in general, but she still accepts and preserves Japanese culture at home and in Japanese schools. If outside the home she adapts to American friends in general because she now lives in America, not in Japan. Hiromi started making the connection with classmates in America and Japanese school.

Hiromi begins to adapt to being an American inside and outside. Hiromi dared to talk to her father about her desire to become a sushi chef like her father.

Papa could see how excited I was. *"If you really want to do this, I will let you try,"* he said. *"You know fish as well as any man. And this is America. Girls can do things here that they cannot do in Japan. Who knows? You might even become itamae-san!"*

Hiromi's father also realized that she was now in America not in Japan and following American culture women can do anything, even though it was considered a man's job when in Japan. Her father began to be able to place her position as a fair parent to

Hiromi. Hiromi is increasingly able to adapt herself as well as possible in America without leaving Japanese culture and traditions.

After 3 years of learning how to make sushi, Hiromi finally became a master chef of sushi, thanks to Hiromi's high curiosity and never giving up on what she dreamed of.

Hiromi's parent waves to Hiromi because they prefer Japan, and Hiromi finally decides to prefer America as her place of residence because she loves America. So, she can develop her sushi restaurant business in America. Her parents are very proud of Hiromi.

b. Internal & External issues

The internal issue of Hiromi's identity relates to the thoughts, feelings, moods, and emotions that shape self-development, stability, and change when interacting with society. Meanwhile, the external issue is the verification process from the community towards individuals who form themselves, develop, stabilize, and change. Whereas in chapter two, the writer argues that identity exists in relationships that are remembered, lived, and projected from everyday life (Britzman 1991, 1994 as cited in Sumara, 1998, p. 205). Because identity is fluid, it doesn't stay constant depending on where we live. The writer uses this theory in this section to see Hiromi's identity. In America, Hiromi feels like an American girl because she has mingled with Americans since she was little. But on the other hand, she is a girl of Japanese immigrant descent who is already attached to her. The issues that Hiromi experienced began to emerge when she was growing up and entered school.

Internal issues when she felt that she was different from American society in general and when her parents did not allow her to go to the fish market, Hiromi felt that she did not deserve to mingle with the people there because she was not allowed to join her father, even though Hiromi thought like that but she did not stop trying and persuading her father until she was allowed to go to the fish market.

Meanwhile, the external issues experienced by Hiromi when she was afraid that her friends at the American school would not accept her because she was different from her friends. Acceptance from the community environment influences the emotions and feelings experienced by Hiromi as an immigrant child for Hiromi's survival in the future so that she feels comfortable and does not have a sense of insecurity with the people around her.

As a Japanese American immigrant girl, Hiromi is taught Japanese culture while at home and attends Japanese schools. The American government supports the existence of Japanese schools in America. This means American society has received immigrant children. But that wasn't enough to make Hiromi feel comfortable, Hiromi experienced many things when she was growing up. One of them went to visit her grandmother's house in Japan for the first time at eight years old.

From this explanation above, it can be concluded that Hiromi's identity is dual Japanese American, but when Hiromi grows up, she has two choices living in America or moving her parents to Japan, but Hiromi prefers to live alone in America. From the analysis above, the writer finds that the identity problem experienced by Hiromi is a process of adaptation to American culture and Japanese culture because adaptation is the main key for Hiromi to be able to feel comfortable living in America and mingle with Americans and Japanese in America.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the data, the writer concludes that:

1. Hiromi's identity based on the story in Hiromi's Hand picture book. She is the child of Japanese American immigrant parents. She is different from immigrant children in general because she was born in America, so she automatically became an American citizen. To avoid the awkward situation because Hiromi is not a native American, she tries to adapt and learn about American and Japanese culture. Hiromi studied in both America and Japan to adapt to these two different cultures.
2. After successfully experiencing a long process of adaptation, starting from the transition process, making connections with Americans, to adjusting to the American experience. Finally, Hiromi maintained good social relations with the Americans and her classmates. This is an adaptation process as well as an inevitable fact not only for migrants but also for anyone visiting other countries as tourists will experience the same thing.
3. Hiromi has a multidimensional identity. She is not only a girl of Japanese descent but also a Japanese American immigrant girl and Hiromi solves her problem by accepting her environment and having two cultures at the same time.

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