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DECONSTRUCTING IDEOLOGY IN ANNE FADIMAN'S 'THE SPIRIT CATCHES YOU AND YOU FALL DOWN': A STUDY OF THE HMONG AMERICAN DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The Hmong diaspora in America has faced ongoing social and cultural alienation and exclusion since the 1970s. Despite the discriminatory environment, they have maintained a strong ethnic group consciousness and formed a collective identity to overcome ethnic tensions and racial prejudices. This study argues that Hmong American life writings offer unique insights into the dynamic interplay between dominant ideologies that create and perpetuate stereotypical depictions of Hmong Americans, as well as the multiple ways in which such ideologies are constantly interrogated, challenged, and eventually deconstructed by members of the community. The study focuses on Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997) to examine the omnipresence of ideologies in Hmong American life writings. It analyzes how these ideologies challenge stereotypical representations of the Hmong diaspora as a voiceless and passive minority. To do so, it draws upon Van Dijk's Ideology as Discourse Analysis and Derrida's Deconstructive Criticism to use intertextuality and connotation as functional tools to explore the ideological deconstruction of stereotypical representations of Hmong diaspora as marginalized and voiceless subjects. Through different traditional medical practices, therapeutic exercises, culinary techniques, customs, and other means, diasporic individuals resist cultural impositions while retaining a collective notion of subjectivity. The omnipresence of Hmong ideologies has deconstructed the notion of an insignificant minority stereotypically associated with Hmong Americans. Instead, it has pushed them to the center due to their strong ideological beliefs.

Keywords: Deconstruction, American, Ideology, stereotypical, Discourse.

Introduction

The United States of America has a long history of racism, repression, and cultural exclusion towards ethnic minorities. The discourse on race and ethnicity has traditionally centered around the White/Black dichotomy, perpetuating structures of white supremacy over the Other (Feagin & Ducey, 2018). However, in recent decades, Asian Americans and Hmong Americans have also experienced racial hatred, stereotyping, and discrimination (Lee, 2006). Due to their unique culture and beliefs, the Hmong American community has been socially and culturally alienated and treated as outsiders (Lee et al., 2017). Despite this exclusionary environment, ethnographic studies have shown that the Hmong diaspora maintains a strong ethnic group consciousness and collective identity to overcome ethnic tensions and prejudice (Cohen, 1997; Yang, 2003). Dominant ideology refers to the beliefs and values that are widely accepted by society and often reinforce existing power structures (Gramsci, 1971). In the case of Hmong Americans, the dominant ideology has perpetuated stereotypes such as them being primitive, uneducated, and backward. These stereotypes have led to discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society. The present study employs intertextuality and connotation as functional tools to ideologically deconstruct the stereotypical representation of the Hmong diaspora as marginalized and voiceless subjects. As a mode of reading and writing, challenges the predefined interpretation of discourse by revealing binary oppositions and latent logocentrism (Hadi & Asl, 2021). It uncovers conflictive discourse in the text through intertextuality and difference. Intertextuality is perceived by Bazerman & Prior (2004) as texts that are part of contemporary culture. Thus, the selection of Deconstruction as a method, along with the employment of intertextuality as a tool, is advantageous for

representing intellectual perceptions associated with human cognition based on group or societal ideologies. Derrida (1967) posits that Deconstruction aims to subvert grand representations that tend to become stereotypes. This strategy can help deconstruct strong nation-states with powerful immigration policies, rhetoric of nationalism, politics of place, metaphysics of native land and tongue, and above all, deconstruct identity built by nation-states to defend themselves against strangers and others. The Hmong American diaspora is a result of their migration from Laos to America during the Vietnam War (Lee et al., 2017). This migration experience has shaped their identity as refugees who have faced multiple challenges in adapting to a new culture while preserving their own.

Research Objective

- To analyze Hmong American life writings to understand how they challenge dominant ideologies and stereotypes.
- To explore Hmong American life writings to examine the dynamic interplay between the role of prevailing ideology in the creation and dissemination of the stereotypical depictions of Hmong Americans as well as the different ways in which such ideologies are constantly contested, disrupted, and deconstructed by members of the community.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature, having an analytical approach. The materials used in this study include autobiographies, memoirs, and other forms of life writing by Hmong Americans.

Significance Of The Research

The study analyzes utterances, notes, and passages to deconstruct stereotypical representations of the Hmong diaspora in America. Intertextuality highlights cultural norms influencing perceptions, while connotation exposes language reinforcing negative stereotypes. The research

challenges these norms, revealing how they contribute to marginalization and voicelessness, and deconstruct Western culture. This study argues that Hmong American life writings provide first-hand accounts of the dynamic interplay between dominant ideology in generating and perpetuating stereotypical depictions of Hmong Americans as well as how such ideologies are constantly interrogated, challenged, and ultimately deconstructed by members of the community.

Literature Review

Hmong Americans: Diasporic life, literature, and representation

The Hmong Americans are a distinct ethnic group who sought refuge in the United States during the 1970s (Yang, 2003). Despite being part of the Asian minority population, they have faced cultural alienation and racial discrimination (Lowe, 1996). One of the most pervasive stereotypes that this community has had to endure is being categorized within the model minority myth, which oversimplifies and ignores the complexities and nuances of Hmong identity and culture (Moua, 2009). According to Weis (2009), such stereotypical groupings are rooted in dominant American ideology that promotes homogenization and assimilation policies and discourses. By documenting memories of their homeland, the Hmong people employed a creative strategy to preserve their cultural heritage, maintain ethnic consciousness and sense of identity, and resist homogenization and cultural annihilation (Ng, 1993). The Hmong diaspora's experience highlights how dominant ideologies can shape perceptions about minority groups. The history of the Hmong people is primarily based on oral traditions, as many first-generation Hmong adults were not literate. Consequently, their life stories have been recorded as biographical narratives with the assistance of ghostwriters from America (Vang, 2010). One of the most renowned narratives that has garnered global attention is Anne Fadiman's

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down (1997), which employs a clinical perspective to explore the Hmong diaspora in America. While some scholars have criticized the book for its various sympathies and idealizations, many critics have praised it for its opposite reasons. Clark, Zuk, & Baramée (2000) argue that Fadiman's life writing is a beautifully written compelling story that is well-suited for pedagogical purposes as it can enrich teaching and sensitize students to cultural issues in healthcare. Similarly, Hobgood et al. (2006) commend it for bringing to light the existing racial biases and prejudices in medical education and practices.

Ideologies and their manifestation

Ideology is a multifaceted concept of ideas and ideals. It is a fundamental aspect of human existence that shapes our values and worldviews, as well as our attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (Asl, 2019 & 2020). The theoretical use of the term ideology has been extensively explored by Althusser (2006), who postulated several hypotheses to understand its utility in societies. According to Althusser (2006), ideology does not merely reflect but represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real world. This definition is closely tied to Lacan's theorization of the mirror stage, which posits that we always live within ideology because of our dependence on language in building our reality. Moreover, Althusser believed that ideology has a material existence; it exists in apparatus and practices. Ideology manifests itself through actions such as rituals, behaviors, and social attitudes. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a field that explores the relationship between language and power, with a focus on how discourse can be used to reinforce social inequality. In his work, Van Dijk (2006) defines ideology as a belief system that is made up of social, cognitive, and discursive components. These components are interconnected and work together to shape the way people think and communicate. Social groups such as political

parties, professions, or religious organizations often use language to express and reproduce their ideologies. Van Dijk (1985) argues that CDA is particularly useful for studying how text and speech are used to endorse and represent social power abuse, dominance, and inequality. Fairclough (2013) sees language as a social practice that is intimately connected to issues of power. The relationship between language and social power is therefore a central concern in CDA. The goal of CDA is to investigate how social inequality is expressed, legitimized, and constituted through language. Van Dijk's (2006) theory of Ideology as Discourse Analysis is based on a conceptual triangle that connects society, discourse, and social cognition. Social cognition refers to the shared sociocultural knowledge that exists within specific groups or societies. This knowledge includes common beliefs, opinions, and attitudes. Ideologies are acquired by members of society through a long process of socialization. They are abstract mental systems that organize socially shared attitudes (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Society has rules that control social cognition while ideologies control the minds of people. CDA aims to reveal both explicit and hidden ideologies in text and speech. Through this analysis, it is possible to challenge dominant ideologies and stereotypical depiction and representation of Hmong diaspora as a voiceless and marginalized minority.

Results And Discussions

This study aims to delve into the intricacies of ideology and its deconstruction, with a specific focus on Anne Fadiman's life writing masterpiece, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997). The work is a poignant account of the tragic life story of Lee's family and their daughter Lia, an epileptic Hmong girl. Through this narrative, Fadiman sheds light on the lack of cross-cultural communication between ethnic minorities and Americans. Furthermore, she highlights

the ways in which Hmong people practice their belief system and culture in America while struggling to maintain a strong sense of identity and their love for their rituals. One of the most significant aspects of this book is its ability to deconstruct stereotypical representations of the Hmong as marginalized with no voice. Instead, Fadiman provides a platform for multiple voices to be heard. By doing so, Fadiman challenges readers to question their own preconceived notions about cultural differences. The clash between different ideological systems is also depicted in the book, which showcases how Western medicine clashes with traditional Hmong beliefs about illness and healing. This clash ultimately leads to Lia's tragic death. However, Fadiman does not present this conflict as a simple binary opposition between two opposing forces. Instead, she presents a nuanced view that acknowledges the complexity of cultural differences. Fadiman shows how misunderstandings can arise when people from different cultures fail to communicate effectively with each other. Moreover, the novel illustrates how culture shapes our understanding of illness and healing. The Hmong people believe that illness is caused by spiritual factors, such as the loss of a soul. Western medicine, on the other hand, views illness as a physical ailment that can be treated with medication. Fadiman's work shows how these differing beliefs can lead to misunderstandings and ultimately tragic outcomes. This struggle is exemplified through Lee's family, who try to maintain their traditional Hmong beliefs while living in America. (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: "Lia Lee, then six years old, with her mother, Fousa Yang, in 1988." Source: Rothman (1996)

The Hmong people have a strong commitment to their tradition and belief system. Their oral tradition of storytelling is characterized by the minutest details, which are associated with their cultural heritage. The frequent use of the phrase 'txubkaumtxub' is a testament to this commitment, as it means "to speak of all kinds of things" (Fadiman, 1997, p. 21). This phrase serves as a reminder that many things in the world may not seem related but are interconnected. While other cultures may view this approach as insignificant and digressive, it highlights the Hmong people's strong cultural ideology. For instance, Nao Kao Lee describes his village in Laos as the place where he was born and where his father and grandfather were born, died, and were buried. He also mentions that his grandfather was born in China but discussing this would take all night (Fadiman, 1997, p. 22). This example illustrates how deeply rooted the Hmong people's beliefs are in their culture. According to Van Dijk (2006), ideology refers to a belief system shared by a particular group of people. Another example of this can be seen through Foua's character when she believed that mourning or screaming would thwart the birth (Fadiman, 1997, p. 11). This belief reflects the Hmong people's traditional practices during childbirth (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: Foua Yang crumpled in tears.
Source: Magagnini (2012)

Another particularly striking example is the strong belief in shamanism, which is known as txibneeb. The shaman is believed to have the

power to cure infertility by asking couples to sacrifice animals such as dogs, cats, chickens, or sheep (Fadiman, 1997, p. 12) (See Figure 3) This belief highlights the importance of traditional healing practices and the role of spiritual leaders in Hmong culture. Furthermore, the story also sheds light on the Hmong women's beliefs regarding the burial of the placenta. The placenta is considered a sacred object that must be buried properly to ensure good health and fortune for both mother and child. As such, Hmong women are deeply invested in ensuring that their babies' placentas are not discarded by hospital staff in any other way. Some have even requested to take their babies' placentas home with



them (Fadiman, 1997, p. 14).

Figure 3: Magic, Witch Doctors, and Shamanic Rituals in California. Source: Kalantari (2012)

The belief in shamanism reflects a deep-seated faith in traditional healing methods that have been passed down through generations. Similarly, the importance placed on the proper burial of the placenta reflects a reverence for life-giving processes and a desire to maintain good health and fortune. Moreover, these examples also highlight how cultural beliefs can clash with Western medical practices, leading to misunderstandings. For instance, when Lia Lee's parents refused to give her medication prescribed by doctors due to their belief in spiritual causes of illness rather than physical ones, it led to a tragic outcome. Foua's encounter with a new notion that contradicts her established beliefs is a demonstration of another general cultural value. In this instance, she is surprised to be offered ice water after giving birth, as many Hmong

people believe that consuming cold food can cause the blood to congeal in the womb. According to their beliefs, a woman who does not observe this taboo may “develop itchy skin or diarrhea in her old age” (Fadiman, 1997, p. 17). Furthermore, Foua's reluctance to share her meals with others also reflects a postpartum taboo within Hmong culture. Specifically, there is a belief that spilling grains of rice accidentally into the chicken pot can cause the newborn to “break out across the nose and cheeks with little white pimples” (Fadiman, 1997, p. 17). Interestingly, these pimples are referred to by the same word as rice in the Hmong language. This example further emphasizes how deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and practices are within Hmong society. The significance of these examples lies in their ability to shed light on how cultural values shape individual behavior and decision-making processes. For Foua, her adherence to these taboos is not simply a matter of personal preference but rather an expression of her identity as a member of the Hmong community. These instances signify the importance of ideology in rituals and customs.

The Legacy of Ideology

Ideology is a complex and multifaceted concept that cannot be easily altered or transformed overnight. In this regard, the novel presents several instances where Lee's parents, despite facing resistance from medical professionals, were able to apply their traditional healing practices to cure their daughter's illness. This narrative highlights the deconstruction of Western hegemony over medicine and brings the Hmong traditional ways of therapy into the forefront, thereby challenging the stereotypical notion that Eastern medicine is outdated and ineffective. The novel reinforces this notion by depicting the views of doctors towards the Hmong people's ideology. For instance, Conquer Good believed that what the medical establishment was offering would continue to be rejected

since the Hmong would view it not as a gift but as a form of coercion (Fadiman, 1997, p. 47). Similarly, public health nurses were quick to conclude that the Lees were non-compliant because their faith in medicine had not been strengthened by two routine immunizations Lia had received (Fadiman, 1997, p. 61). These passages illustrate how deeply ingrained cultural beliefs can influence one's perception of medical treatment. The term “Hmong” itself carries an ideological legacy that translates to “free people.” As Fadiman notes, “Hmong, the name they prefer themselves, is usually set to mean free men” (1997, p. 23). This intertextual connotation characterizes the unyielding resilience and determination of the Hmong people as free individuals even within American culture. Despite never having a country or king of their own, they have remained steadfast in their desire to live as Hmong people with a right to exist in this world (Fadiman, 1997, p. 28). Fadiman's work challenges readers to question their assumptions about the superiority of Western medicine and the need for cultural sensitivity in healthcare. The book highlights the importance of understanding and respecting different cultural beliefs practices and ideology.

Perseverance of Ideology

The Hmong people have a rich and complex history, marked by war and conflict as they fought to maintain their unique identity. This is evident in the very word “Hmong,” which speaks to their struggles and triumphs over the centuries. As Father Savina notes in the novel “That is How the Miao Became Mountain People,” they have remained resilient and determined to preserve their culture and way of life (Fadiman, 1997, p. 24). Despite their strength and perseverance, however, the Hmong have also been subject to stereotypes and negative connotations from others. As Fadiman notes, the Chinese referred to them as “Miao” or “Meo,” which carried a range of meanings

depending on who you asked - from "barbarians" to "bumpkins" to "people who sound like cats" (Fadiman, 1997, p. 24). Regardless of the specific insult used, these labels were meant to denigrate and marginalize the Hmong people. Despite these challenges, however, the Hmong have managed to maintain their independence and cultural identity over time. As Father Savina notes in Fadiman's novel, they have held onto their language and customs while preserving the ethnic spirit of their race (p. 24). This idea is further explored by Van Dijk (2006), who defines ideology as a form of resistance against opposition. In this sense, it can be argued that the Hmong's determination to maintain their cultural identity despite external pressures represents a form of ideological resistance against those who would seek to erase or diminish them.

Ideology as a Belief System

Van Dijk (2006) posits that members of a particular society share a similar belief system, which he terms as group knowledge and attitude. This knowledge is presupposed, and individuals from other communities may perceive it as mere superstition or belief. Fadiman (1997) describes Hmong people's beliefs regarding illness causation, which includes various sources such as "eating the wrong food, drinking contaminated water, doing one's laundry in a lake inhabited by dragons, pointing one's finger at the full moon, touching a newborn mouse, killing a large snake, urinating on a rock that looks like a tiger or having bird's droppings on one's head" (Fadiman, 1997, p. 18). Postmodernists view this general knowledge as a subjective truth that is dependent on individuals and cultural beliefs. Asl (2018) notes that subjective truth is related to the individual's perception of reality and their cultural background. Erickson (2009) further explains that truth is related to a possible unanimity between rational minds (p. 15). Therefore, what one person perceives as true may not be accepted by another individual or culture. In

Fadiman's (1997) book, the Hmong people's understanding of the soul and their efforts to keep it happy are evident. The concept of soul is central to their beliefs, as seen in the pre-meal ritual where the soul-caller brushes Lia's hand with white strings while saying "I'm sweeping away the ways of sickness" (p. 20). This ritual reflects their belief that sprouts out from ideology.

Subjective Truth

Subjective truth advocates individual experience and knowledge, which is often interpreted as superstition by other cultures and exemplified in Fadiman's novel. An example can be found in the Hmong people's understanding of quaq dab peg, their word for epilepsy. In the novel, social worker Hilt describes it as an illness that sets Lia apart from others and leads her to become a shaman: "They felt Lia was kind of an anointed one, like a member of royalty. She was a very special person in their culture because she had these spirits in her and she might grow up to be a shaman, and so sometimes their thinking was not so much a medical problem as it was a blessing" (Fadiman, 1997, p. 32). The book also notes that "Hmong epileptics often become shamans. Their seizures are thought to be evidence that they have the power to perceive things other people cannot see" (Fadiman, 1997, p. 31). Postmodernism is characterized by its rejection of objective truth and its emphasis on subjectivity and relativism. This philosophy is rooted in Nietzsche's perspectivism, which asserts that there is no objective reality outside of our perspectives (Owen, 2014). Instead, our understanding of reality is shaped by our individual experiences and cultural backgrounds. The Hmong people's belief in quaq dab peg illustrates this idea perfectly. While Western medicine views epilepsy as a neurological disorder with physical causes and symptoms that can be treated with medication or surgery, the Hmong view it as a spiritual condition that requires shamanic

intervention. This difference in perspective is not simply a matter of cultural difference, but a fundamental disagreement about the nature of reality itself. They believe that shamans can communicate with spirits and access knowledge that is not available to ordinary people. This belief is not based on empirical evidence or scientific research but on their own subjective experiences and cultural traditions. From a postmodern perspective, both Western medicine and the Hmong understanding of *quaq dab peg* are equally valid ways of understanding reality. Neither perspective can claim to be objectively true, as both are shaped by cultural biases and individual experiences.

Deconstruction of Western Culture

The narrative also highlights the deconstruction of Western culture through the metaphor of food. This serves to shatter the stereotypical notion that minorities, such as the Hmong, have no voice in the United States. Throughout the novel, there are several instances where American food is derogatorily described by the Hmong people. For example, Lia's mother describes black coffee as "the black water was the only MCMC-provided food that passed her lips during her stay in the maternity ward" (Fadiman, 1997, p. 17). This illustrates how even something as simple as food can be a symbol of cultural differences and a source of tension between two groups. Furthermore, Fadiman's work also shows how Westerners can learn from the traditional healing practices of other cultures. The life story depicts how Westerners come to accept traditional healing methods when they encounter a disease. For instance, during Conquer Good's five-month stay in Ban Vinai, he was successfully treated with Hmong herbs for diarrhea and a gashed toe: "A trivneeb informed him that his homesick soul has wandered back to Chicago, and two chickens were sacrificed to expedite its return" (Fadiman, 1997, p. 47). This demonstrates how Westerners can benefit

from alternative healing practices that may be more effective than their own. Van Dijk (2006) suggests that these ideologies are expressed and generally reproduced in social practice. In other words, cultural beliefs are not just abstract concepts but are manifested in everyday actions and interactions between individuals from different cultures. The clash between Hmong culture and Western medicine is an example of this phenomenon. The narrative presents a compelling notion of the West's attempt to impose its ideology upon the Hmong people. This is evident through the words of educational consultant Moffat, who acknowledges that while their primary objective was to provide medical aid, they were also covertly attempting to convert the Hmong people to Christianity (Fadiman, 1997, p. 45). This striking ideological deconstruction is further highlighted in a passage where the Hmong people are shown to avoid Western hospitals staffed by zealous Christian volunteers. This suggests that the Hmong are bold enough to challenge American culture, which seeks to modify their beliefs and convert them to Christianity. The book suggests that Hmong Americans are among the toughest diasporic minorities living in the US, as they refuse to let go of their ideologies despite dwelling within American culture. As Fadiman writes, "There is a tremendous difference between dealing with the Hmong and dealing with anyone else, an infinite difference" (1997, p. 80). This sentiment is echoed in Dan's observation when he first sees the Lee family: "This won't be boring" (Fadiman, 1997, p. 37). The narrative thus highlights the resilience of the Hmong people in the face of adversity. Despite facing discrimination and marginalization in the US, they have managed to maintain their cultural identity and traditions.

Conclusion

This research study delved into Anne Fadiman's life writing, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997), employing

Derrida's Deconstruction and Van Dijk's Ideology as a Discourse Analysis. The analysis indicated that the narrative's powerful deconstruction of stereotypical representations of the Hmong diaspora in the US as voiceless and culturally subdued emerges. The study demonstrated how the book offers a thoughtful and sensitive portrayal of the lives and struggles of Hmong Americans, highlighting their marginalized status. We argued that the diasporic community resists cultural impositions through traditional practices, preserving their collective subjectivity. This was shown by the omnipresence of Hmong ideologies challenging the notion of insignificance typically associated with Hmong Americans, pushing them to the center due to their strong beliefs. It is concluded that Fadiman's text challenges dominant discourses about Hmong Americans, presenting alternative perspectives on their culture and history, thus opening new understandings about marginalized communities in America. Van Dijk's Ideology as a Discourse Analysis reveals how language constructs power relations, shaping perceptions of marginalized communities. Contrary to the portrayal of Hmong Americans as passive and powerless, Fadiman depicts them as active agents, resisting cultural impositions and asserting their agency. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* stands as a powerful example of life writing challenging dominant discourses about marginalized communities, reminding readers of the agency and resilience within these communities. The study underlined the book's significance in promoting a deeper appreciation of cultural differences and inspiring a reevaluation of preconceived notions about marginalized communities in America.

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