

Memory and Identity in Thanhha Lai's Inside Out and Back Again

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Abstract. This study focuses on the memory and identity emerged in Thanhha Lai's Inside Out and Back Again. The topic underlies memory inherited by a ten-year-old girl, Hà. Hà's experience as a refugee from Vietnam shaped her hybrid identity later when she lives in the USA. She flees Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and resettles in Alabama. The objective of this study is to describe how memory, especially trauma and displacement, shapes Hà's evolving identity. Using psychological approach and Postmemory theory, the study results Hà's lived and inherited experiences combine to create a hybrid identity based on cultural continuity, memory, and resiliency. The hybrid identity reflects once that the post memory creates new, blended identities from the shared experiences of past collective trauma or displacement, often in postcolonial or diasporic contexts. This study is relevant for understanding the issue of refugee and diasporic children. Children of refugee may develop hybrid identity that incorporate both their family's past trauma and their present-day experiences in a new country, leading to cultural shifts, memory conflicts, and a new sense of self.

Keywords: Diaspora; Hybrid Identity; Memory; Postmemory; Refugee Experience

1. INTRODUCTION

Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, many Vietnamese seeks refugee in other countries, including United States of America. The refugees seek a new life in another city such as Alabama. Psychologically, they experience uncertainty, confusion, and traumatic situation as they embrace new journey in different culture and space. Although they have moved on from their homeland, their past memory and trauma passed down from generation to generations. Thus, the intersection between memory and identity is crucial in the refugee study as a post-memory and trauma can shape one's evolving identity.

In line with post memory experience, Hirsch's post memory revolves around the topic of traumatic experience of the older generation. Marianne Hirsch proposed this theory with reference about relationship the children of Holocaust survivors of cultural or collective trauma have to their parents' memories. This concept suggests that trauma is able to be transmitted intergenerationally. In this sense, the trauma of an earlier generation is inherited and remains in the memory of generation after through narrative or performative acts by the earlier generation.

Thanhha Lai's Inside Out and Back Again is a poignant verse novel that captures the emotional and psychological journey of Hà, a ten-year-old girl forced to flee Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. As she navigates life as a refugee in the United States, Hà grapples with a fractured sense of identity rooted in both her memories of Vietnam and her attempts to adapt to an unfamiliar culture. Hà, and her family flee from Saigon, Vietnam, in 1975 after the Fall of Saigon and resettle in Alabama. Told in verse, the story details Hà's experiences with culture

shock, learning English, facing bullying from classmates like "Pink Boy," and grappling with the uncertainty of her father's whereabouts and their new life in the United States. The narrative culminates with the family finding a new rhythm in Alabama, with Hà accepting her new home and celebrating Tết, the Vietnamese New Year, and even discovering that her father is alive and living in New York City.

This paper explores how memory functions not only as a link to Hà's homeland and family history but also as a central force shaping her evolving identity. The novel occupies an important place in contemporary children's and young-adult literature for its lyrical treatment of refugee experience and cultural dislocation. Using Hirsch's concept of post-memory foregrounds how traumatic histories are not only recalled by direct witnesses but are also transmitted and felt by later generations often through images, stories, objects, and affective practices. Those inherited memories then create a hybrid identity of the main character as narrated in the novel.

Regarding the post memory topic, there are some researches have been conducted. The first article was written by Andri Fernanda. His article was entitled "Transmisi Memori dan Trauma dalam Mother Land Karya Dmetri Kakmi: Kajian Postmemory". It focuses on Dmetri Kakmi's traumatic memory transmission structure in his novel "Motherland" and genderization in traumatic impressions that emerged in his work. Meanwhile the next article focusing on the post memory was written by Cielo G. Festino and Andréa Machado de Almeida Mattos. In an article entitled "Memory, Postmemory and the Role of Narratives among Women Writers from the Adivasi Communities of Goa", they analyse life narratives "Where have All the Songs and Rituals Gone?" (2019) by Mozinha Fernandes and "A Velip Writes Back" (2019) by Priyanka Velip, members of the Adivasi community of Goa, who consider themselves as the first inhabitants of this Indian state. In addition, there is another article written by Zietha Arlamanda Asri and Sulistya Ningtyas focusing on the strace of memory of the Vietnam war. Their article was entitled "The Trace of Memories of the Vietnam War: The Struggle Facing the Trauma in Shirley Ann Grau's "Homecoming"" This research analysed the representation of traumatic memories in Sherley Ann Grau's literary work "Homecoming," which focuses on trauma resulting from the Vietnam War. The main issue is how these traumatic memories are processed and dealt with by the characters in the narrative, particularly from psychological and sociocultural perspectives.

Although scholarship on postmemory and the Vietnam War has richly examined trauma transmission, diasporic memory, and collective identity in oral histories, memoirs, and cinematic texts, a distinct gap remains when those frameworks are applied specifically to

Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again*. Existing studies tend to emphasize adult testimony, historical reportage, or transnational memory politics, while comparatively little work interrogates how Lai's children centered, free-verse novel negotiates postmemory through the formal features of poetry, language acquisition, and adolescent identity formation. In other words, researchers have not fully connected (1) the book's poetic form and bilingual voice to (2) the embodied, gendered construction of a refugee self across generations. Nor have they sufficiently compared Lai's fictionalized child perspective with empirical accounts of Vietnamese refugee families to show how literary techniques mediate intergenerational transmission of war memory. Finally, the literature underexamines how school, language loss, and play in Lai's narrative operate as sites where postmemory is contested, performed, or resisted. A focused study that combines close reading of Lai's formal strategies with interdisciplinary methods (oral history comparison, reader-response, and theories of postmemory) would fill this gap and clarify how *Inside Out & Back Again* both preserves and transforms Vietnamese war memory in young adult literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory offers a critical lens for examining how memory and identity are intertwined in diasporic and refugee narratives. Postmemory refers to the way descendants of trauma survivors "remember" events they did not directly experience but inherit through stories, silences, and images (Hirsch, 2012). This form of memory is mediated and imaginative, yet it profoundly shapes individual and collective identities. Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory is not static but dynamic, constantly reinterpreted within cultural contexts and creative representations.

Within this framework, three interconnected dimensions of trauma—personal, collective, and cultural—emerge as vital in shaping hybrid identities. Personal trauma refers to the intimate, embodied effects of displacement and loss on the individual. In *Inside Out & Back Again*, Hà's experiences of fleeing Vietnam, navigating linguistic alienation, and enduring bullying in America demonstrate how childhood identity is scarred yet reshaped by forced migration. Collective trauma involves the shared suffering of a community, often transmitted across generations. Hà's family embodies this dimension, carrying the memory of war, loss of homeland, and fractured kinship ties that shape the refugee experience. Finally, cultural trauma extends beyond individual or familial memory to signify a group's enduring mark on identity through historical violence. For Vietnamese refugees, the Vietnam War is not just a personal

or family memory but a cultural wound that reverberates in diasporic communities worldwide (Alexander, 2004; Hoskins, 2014).

These overlapping traumas, when mediated through postmemory, often lead to the formation of hybrid identity. Hirsch (2012) notes that postmemory is both affiliative and reconstructive: descendants of trauma inherit the past but must reinterpret it in new contexts. In Lai's novel, Hà embodies this hybridity as she negotiates her Vietnamese heritage with her new American surroundings. Her fragmented free-verse voice illustrates the tension between memory of homeland and adaptation to a foreign culture, resulting in a selfhood that is neither fully Vietnamese nor fully American but hybrid, constantly shifting between inherited trauma and present survival.

Existing research on Vietnamese diasporic memory often focuses on adult testimonies, oral histories, and cinematic portrayals of the Vietnam War (Espiritu, 2020). However, Lai's child-centered narrative demonstrates how the second generation engages with inherited trauma differently, not through direct recollection but through the imaginative reconstruction of identity in poetry. Thus, Hirsch's postmemory framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how personal, collective, and cultural trauma intersect in *Inside Out & Back Again*, illuminating how hybrid identities emerge from the negotiation of past and present, memory and imagination, trauma and resilience.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative method was applied in this research. Sugiyono (2019) states that qualitative research is research used to examine the conditions of natural objects and the data obtained tends to be qualitative data with qualitative data analysis technique. In addition, according to Cresswell (2018) a qualitative research approach is research that aims to study or understand social problems. The data was taken from the novel *Inside Out and Back Again* as the primary data. Other supportive materials are taken from theoretical books and articles published in journals related to obsessive love topic. These sources were beneficial in terms of providing theoretical frameworks and information related to post memory, and identity of the main character in the novel. The correlations of various sources ensured a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the issues presented in the novel.

The data analysis was carried out using the descriptive qualitative method. The data collection and analysis process employed in this research can be divided into several systematic steps. First, the researcher conducted a close reading of *Inside Out and Back Again* to gain a comprehensive understanding of the story and its intrinsic elements. Second, specific quotes—

such as dialog, narration and descriptive passage were identified and highlighted, particularly those that depict some characteristics of memory and identity as seen in the novel. Third, these selected excerpts were analyzed through the post memory theory proposed by Marianne Hirsch regarding the postmemory which is inherited by the ancestor which can shape someone's evolving identity. Lastly, pertinent secondary sources and academic literature were explored to support the analysis's validity and strengthen the interpretations and conclusions of the study.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part covers the analysis of memory and identity as seen in Tan Ha lai's *Inside Out and Back Again*.

Memory as a Link to the Past

In Hirsch's framework, postmemory functions as a bridge that links descendants to experiences they did not live through but inherit affectively. In *Inside Out & Back Again*, memory consistently serves as Hà's anchor to her homeland and family history, offering continuity amidst the chaos of displacement. Hà recalls her father, who disappeared during the Vietnam War, as an absent but powerful figure shaping her identity. She reflects, "Father left home when I was one / so Mother acts as if / I can't remember him. / But I do, / not the picture of him / framed in the front room, / but flashes of him / sinking into the sea" (Lai, 2011, p. 27). This memory, though fragmented and reconstructed, illustrates Hirsch's notion of postmemory: Hà does not fully "remember" her father, yet inherited images and stories create a vivid emotional presence that defines her sense of self. The image comes from the picture of her father in the front room. She does not recognize him vividly, but the picture brings the memory of him.

Furthermore, food and rituals act as mnemonic devices that connect Hà to Vietnam. When the family flees by boat, she laments, "Whoever invented English / must have loved snakes. / How do you say / nước mắm / in English? / Fish sauce? / Ugh. Not the same" (Lai, 2011, p. 196). This shows how memory preserves cultural continuity; food is not only nourishment but an affective link to the past that resists linguistic translation. Such details embody Hirsch's argument that memory transmitted through cultural practices becomes a vital mechanism of identity formation, especially for displaced children.

Throughout the novel, Hà clings to her memories of Vietnam as a way to retain her connection to home after being uprooted by war. Her recollections often emerge through sensory details and emotional associations. For instance, before fleeing Saigon, Hà notes: "I

touch my big toe to the tile floor. / Cool. / I will never forget this moment” (Lai, 2011, p. 60). This small, intimate gesture of touching the familiar tile becomes a symbolic act of memory preservation. It captures Hà's desire to hold on to the tangible aspects of home its textures, sensations, and rhythms before they are lost forever. The coolness of the tile becomes an anchor to her identity, grounding her in the past even as her world collapses around her.

Memory in *Inside Out and Back Again* also operates as a form of resistance to erasure. In the refugee journey, Hà's recollections serve not merely as nostalgia but as an assertion of continuity. On the crowded ship to America, she recalls, “I close my eyes and whisper / home / is a dragon / breathing fire / while I am a fish / swimming away” (p. 69). Here, the image of the dragon an emblem of Vietnamese culture embodies the power of collective memory. By invoking cultural symbols, Hà connects her personal loss to a larger national narrative, suggesting that memory sustains identity even when physical belonging is impossible.

When Hà arrives in America, her memories of Vietnam begin to clash with the unfamiliarity of her new surroundings. She recalls the Tet celebration and the papaya tree from her home, both recurring symbols of lost innocence and rootedness. She laments, “The papaya tree is gone. / Father is gone. / The house is gone. / Yet I can still smell papaya / ripening, yellow skin / thin like paper” (p. 75). The sensory memory of papaya its smell and color transcends loss and displacement. It allows Hà to momentarily re-inhabit the world she left behind, demonstrating how memory transforms absence into emotional presence. This persistence of memory represents what Marianne Hirsch (2012) calls postmemory the way memories, especially those formed through trauma and loss, remain alive and transmitted through emotional, rather than literal, experience.

Moreover, Hà's memories are not static; they evolve as she reconciles her Vietnamese past with her American present. Toward the end of the novel, when she begins to find comfort in her new life, her memories shift from pure longing to gentle remembrance: “I look up at the night sky. / The moon is a hammocked papaya. / My heart fills with seeds” (p. 257). Here, memory transforms from pain into resilience. The papaya once a symbol of loss becomes an emblem of continuity and growth, suggesting that the past is not something to be left behind but something that can coexist with the present. Through this transformation, Hà's memories become the foundation for a new hybrid identity, linking her past and future.

Trauma and Displacement

The trauma of war and the forced migration deepen Hà's reliance on memory. Trauma cannot be put into words. It is beyond comprehension, has not been resolved, and it always be pushed back into the unconscious (Heriyati, Sarumpaet, and Suprihatin, p.1). Memory becomes

both a burden and a solace painful in what it recalls, yet vital in maintaining continuity. Lai subtly demonstrates how Hà's memories are sometimes involuntarily triggered by sensory experiences, such as the taste of food or a smell, reinforcing the involuntary nature of memory, as theorized by scholars like Marcel Proust and Sigmund Freud. These moments reveal how trauma alters the function of memory from something purely nostalgic to something more complex an involuntary re-experiencing of loss and fear.

Displacement amplifies trauma, both personal and collective. Cultural Displacement refers to the psychological and emotional effect of losing or leaving one's native cultural setting, which often results in a fractured sense of identity (Salim and Dave, p.2). Meanwhile, Hirsch (2012) stresses that postmemory often emerges from traumatic events transmitted through family narratives and silences. Thus, the evolving identity prevails when someone moves from one culture to other. Hà's journey from Saigon to America embodies this transmission, as her child's voice conveys both the immediate disorientation of exile and the inherited grief of war. When the family departs on the refugee boat, Hà confesses, "I'm mad at Mother / for choosing to go / all the way to America, / not to stay / with our loved ones / in Thailand, / Malaysia, / or even France" (Lai, 2011, p. 118). The tone of resentment and helplessness underscores the trauma of being uprooted, reinforcing how displacement destabilizes personal identity.

The trauma also manifests in encounters with racism and cultural alienation in the United States. Hà experiences bullying at school: "They call me / Pancake face. / They make slanted eyes / when they see me" (Lai, 2011, p. 196). These experiences of humiliation compound the inherited trauma of war, producing what Hirsch calls "the aftereffects" of violence in the next generation. Yet even as Hà internalizes these wounds, her poetic voice transforms them into testimony, echoing Hirsch's claim that postmemory is not only a burden but also a creative reworking of trauma into cultural expression.

The trauma intensifies with displacement. When Hà and her family flee Vietnam, the narrative moves from the familiar sensory world of Saigon to the chaotic, uncertain space of the refugee ship. Lai's spare verse captures both fear and disorientation: "The ship dips / left, right, / left, right, / I clutch the hem / of Mother's sleeve" (p. 81). The rhythmic repetition mimics the rocking of the ship, but it also evokes emotional instability. The sea voyage becomes a metaphor for the psychological turbulence of exile where identity and safety are in constant flux. This physical displacement mirrors what Cathy Caruth (1996) calls "the

unclaimed experience” of trauma a haunting that cannot be fully processed or narrated, only relived through fragmented memory and bodily sensation.

Arriving in America does not resolve Hà's trauma; rather, it transforms it. The experience of cultural alienation and racism in Alabama creates a second layer of displacement—a social and linguistic exile. Hà expresses her frustration with learning English: “Whoever invented English / must have loved snakes. / a—ah—uh—uh—uh. / Why do so many sounds / need all my tongue's twists?” (p. 118). Language here becomes a site of trauma. Hà's struggle to pronounce words reflects her struggle to inhabit a new cultural identity. Her tongue, twisted by the foreign sounds, symbolizes how displacement reshapes not just where she lives, but how she speaks, thinks, and even feels.

Hà's experiences of bullying and exclusion in school deepen her emotional isolation. When her classmates mock her accent and call her “pancake face,” she internalizes shame and humiliation: “They laugh. / I run. / They yell / Boo-Da! Boo-Da! / Their laughter / eats my ears” (p. 139). The auditory image “their laughter eats my ears” conveys how trauma invades the body, transforming external cruelty into internalized pain. The dehumanizing laughter devours her sense of worth, turning language, once a medium of connection, into an instrument of violence.

Yet Lai also portrays trauma as a process of survival and adaptation. Over time, Hà learns to reconfigure her sense of belonging by integrating fragments of her past into her new world. In one poignant reflection, she says: “I will learn / to count / without / looking back” (p. 242). This line marks the beginning of healing. While Hà cannot fully escape the trauma of displacement, she starts to reclaim agency—deciding to move forward while acknowledging the weight of her loss. Her statement echoes Marianne Hirsch's (2012) notion that postmemory can transform trauma into resilience by integrating the past into new forms of identity.

Memory and Cultural Identity

Hà's identity as a Vietnamese girl becomes strained in Alabama, where she faces bullying, cultural misunderstanding, and linguistic challenges. In these moments, her memories become acts of preservation—silent affirmations of who she is in a world that tries to redefine her. Her name, her language, and even her remembered traditions become markers of a cultural identity she refuses to abandon. Lai presents memory as not static, but active—helping Hà resist assimilation and instead find a balance between two identities.

Cultural identity in *Inside Out & Back Again* is not fixed but hybrid, constructed through the interplay of memory, trauma, and adaptation. Regarding this matter, Hall believes that cultural identity reflects the original ethnic culture, ethnic culture and linguistic and

religious culture (Hall in Yang, Zhao, and Liu, p.588). In line with the previous statement, Hirsch's notion of cultural postmemory underscores how collective trauma becomes embedded in cultural practices, shaping diasporic identities. Hà's negotiation of identity emerges in her attempts to reconcile Vietnamese traditions with her new American life. For instance, she recalls, "Our lives / will twist and twist, / intermingling / like the round and round / of Tết cakes" (Lai, 2011, p. 30). Here, the image of Tết cakes symbolizes continuity with Vietnamese culture, even as Hà anticipates the transformations that exile will bring.

At the same time, cultural identity is reconstructed in America. Hà learns English reluctantly but realizes its power for survival: "MiSSS SScott / points to me / ... / I have to say / something. / So I bite my lips, / hold my breath, / and blur out words: / Thank you" (Lai, 2011, p. 145). This moment captures how memory and cultural negotiation produce hybridity. Hà's identity is no longer solely defined by her Vietnamese heritage but reshaped by her adaptation to American society. This hybrid identity reflects Hirsch's assertion that postmemory is both affiliative and reconstructive, enabling survivors and their descendants to build new selves while carrying traces of inherited trauma.

Hà's Vietnamese identity is also portrayed through the rhythms of daily life and rituals that define her home. She recalls, "Every morning / I chant / Nam mô A Di Đà Phật / like Mother / does not hear me" (Lai, 2011, p. 7). This opening moment situates Hà's identity in cultural and spiritual continuity. The daily chantan invocation of the Buddha embodies the collective memory of her family and community. Even as a child, Hà performs cultural belonging through inherited practices, showing how identity is carried through embodied acts of remembrance.

When Hà and her family are forced to flee Vietnam, their memories become the only remaining connection to their cultural roots. On the refugee ship, her mother insists on preserving customs even in crisis: "Mother says, / remember, / you must always bow / when you greet an elder, / even on a ship" (p. 90). This insistence reflects how cultural identity is maintained through memory, ritual, and respect, even in displacement. Her mother's words reveal an intergenerational transmission of values—what Marianne Hirsch (2012) calls postmemory where memory is not only personal but cultural, linking past and future through shared traditions.

As Hà arrives in America, the negotiation between Vietnamese and American identities intensifies. She experiences cultural dissonance when classmates and teachers mispronounce her name and dismiss her heritage. She confides, "No one can pronounce / Hà. / They call me /

Pam” (p. 118). The renaming symbolizes the pressure to assimilate and the erasure of cultural identity. The loss of her name a core marker of identity reveals how memory becomes a site of resistance. Though others attempt to redefine her, Hà internally clings to her Vietnamese self, sustained by the memories of family and homeland. Her memory thus acts as an invisible form of cultural survival.

Food, too, becomes a vehicle of cultural memory and identity. When Hà’s family eats American food for the first time, she reacts:

“The hot dog is so pink, / the bread so white, / and the taste— / I’m not sure / I like it” (p. 145). This sensory rejection of unfamiliar food symbolizes her resistance to cultural assimilation. Later, when her mother grows herbs and cooks traditional dishes in Alabama, food becomes a way to reclaim identity: “Mother brings home / seeds from the old land. / Cilantro, basil, mint / sprout in the back garden” (p. 231). The act of planting Vietnamese herbs in American soil represents both survival and adaptation memory transforming into cultural hybridity. The garden becomes a living metaphor for transnational identity, rooted in the memory of home yet flourishing in new terrain.

By the end of the novel, Hà begins to reconcile her dual identities, allowing both to coexist. She reflects: “I am / not / the same girl / who left home. / But I carry / inside / the same dreams” (p. 257). This line encapsulates Lai’s vision of cultural identity as fluid yet continuous. Hà’s memories do not trap her in the past; instead, they become the foundation upon which a new, hybrid identity is built. Her journey echoes Stuart Hall’s (1990) idea that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a “positioning” a continual process of becoming shaped by memory, history, and experience.

5. CONCLUSION

In *Inside Out and Back Again*, memory is not merely a passive recollection but an active, dynamic force that shapes Hà’s identity throughout her journey. Through the lens of memory, Lai offers a deeply human portrayal of the refugee experience one that recognizes the pain of loss, the challenge of change, and the enduring power of cultural identity. The novel ultimately suggests that identity is not erased by displacement but redefined through memory, resilience, and adaptation. Memory allows Hà to preserve her connection to Vietnam through images of the papaya tree, family rituals, and her father’s absence while simultaneously adapting to life in America. It functions as both an emotional anchor and a transformative tool, helping her negotiate between the familiar past and the uncertain present. As her memories evolve from loss to resilience, Hà learns to integrate elements of both cultures, the “third space”

of identity formation. In this space, her Vietnamese heritage and American experiences coexist, reflecting how memory enables displaced individuals to reconstruct belonging and selfhood. Ultimately, Lai presents memory not as nostalgia but as a creative act that turns cultural fragmentation into a renewed sense of identity and continuity. The study give insight

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