

Original Research Article

Navigating Cultural Diversity: An Examination of Ethnic Minority Psychology in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*

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Abstract: This paper aimed to examine the psychology of ethnic minority in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. It specifically analyzed key incidents that reveal how entrenched power structures enforce a singular narrative of health and illness, often disregarding the Hmong perspective rooted in their cultural beliefs and practices. Furthermore, it discussed the implications of these disparities on the psychological well-being of the family, illustrating how their identity and lived experiences shape their interactions within a predominantly Western framework. The descriptive method was used, and the analysis was based on the Critical Race Theory (CRT). The findings unveiled the systemic racism and cultural barriers that contribute to the miscommunication and mistrust between the Hmong family and medical professionals. Besides, the study recommended recognizing diverse cultural narratives in healthcare to promote equity and understanding, suggesting that a more inclusive approach can bridge the gap between differing worldviews, thereby improving patient outcomes for minority communities.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, behavior development literature, Hmong refugees, ethnic minority culture, Cultural Competence.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnic minority psychology examines issues related to race/ethnicity, culture, attitudes, behaviors, policy, and institutional practice. It is largely driven by a willingness to address identities marginalized by the profession. Findings within ethnic minority psychology have changed how we think about when – for instance – prejudice, discrimination, and social-cultural processes such as acculturation, enculturation, and bicultural identity are implicated in child development outcomes. Nonetheless, such work remains largely the domain of experimental and quantitative methods. This may limit the depth of many discussions, as well as the field's overall responsiveness to a study originating outside itself. Indeed, some less visible rich discussions originating within other “-ologies” such as demography, history, and sociology address thorny, complex ethnic minority questions. So, why shouldn't the field of ethnic minority psychology also address the humanities and humanistic social studies?

The term "ethnic minority psychology" refers to a unique area of research within psychology. It is unique in the sense that, though defined by its focus on ethnic minority issues and communities, its study areas are as

diverse as all psychology is. The research areas are diverse and span the human life cycle, human cognitive abilities, global mental health, and clinical disorder development in ways that reflect the richness of normal psychology research. What makes ethnic psychology unique is not the topics of study, but rather the focus, goals, and ultimately, the reason for study. Although an ultimate goal is to discover the general laws of psychology, the vast majority of past psychological research and the research currently conducted have focused almost exclusively on the experience and expression of mainly white, middle-class, American psychology students or similar populations.

In recent years, psychologists have attempted to recognize and serve the diverse needs of a multicultural society. There has been an increasing call from ethnic minority individuals to have ethnic minority psychologists serving their mental health needs. However, this is not the only area in which ethnic diversity may be examined within psychology. Understanding ethnic minority culture and its interactions with mainstream society should be an area of study as well. Understanding both how Hmong-American clients may relate to mainstream society and how psychological services are currently offered is

important since ethnic minority culture is not only ignored but is often regarded as inferior and strange. Indeed, to psychologists, other professionals, and to many nonprofessionals, ethnic minority populations are often viewed as being at the root of all problems.

Statement of the Problem:

The problem of this research is represented in exploring the intersection of psychology and literature through the lens of the intergroup diversity model of racial identity. It examines a compelling narrative that highlights cultural conflicts between physicians and Hmong patients and their families. The story unfolds as both a tragedy and a rich tapestry of teachable moments, reflecting the complexities of cross-cultural interactions in a healthcare setting.

Research Questions:

1. To what extent is the psychology of the ethnic minority in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. affected by the cultural practices of the majority?
2. What are the key incidents that reveal how entrenched power structures enforce a singular narrative of health and illness?
3. What are the implications of these disparities on the psychological well-being of the family?
4. To what extent do the Western medical world and Hmong culture, as represented in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, clash?

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze the psychology of ethnic minority in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.
2. To know the key incidents that reveal how entrenched power structures enforce a singular narrative of health and illness.
3. To know the implications of these disparities on the psychological well-being of the family, illustrating how their identity and lived experiences shape their interactions within a predominantly Western framework.
4. To highlight the clash between the Western medical world and Hmong culture as represented in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The recent research efforts on the representation of ethnic minorities in art has significantly highlighted the psychological effects of being part of a minority in a society where the majority decides the social and cultural life of the minority, and shapes their psychological worlds. In this respect, Ahmadi (2021) examined the psychological consequences of the rape that occurred in Indonesia on May 12, 1998 in Indonesia, as a number of ethnic minority girls were victims of this tragic incidence. The study attributed the traumatic feelings of the raped girls to the oppression practiced upon them by the ethnic majority.

Psychoanalytic thought has not ignored the negative consequences of racism on ethnic minorities. In this context, Stoute (2022) examined the negative effects of racism on nursery kids. The study found a strong link between negative feelings and racism.

The representation of ethnic minorities in fiction has touched on the psychological structure of characters belonging to ethnic minorities, highlighting the dilemma of living in a society where ethnic minorities are exploited, harassed and victimized. This phenomenon has been represented in various fictional works, particularly in the American short story, like Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction (Glamuzina, 2022; Mukattash, 2023). Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories are known for their realistic representation of the suffering of ethnic minorities, giving much attention to the psychological problems they experience (Glamuzina, 2022). Significantly, a large space of the American short story is devoted to the discussion of the diasporic identity and the mother abjection in ethnic minority short story (Mukattash, 2023).

But the discussion of the psychological suffering experienced by ethnic minorities is not exclusive to the American short story. Other forms of art, from different nationalities, have given this problem equal importance. Iftene (2024) found evidence of national minorities' representations in the contemporary Romanian cinema. The study highlighted the journey of the Romanian ethnic minorities from cheap exotism to self-representation, as shown in the contemporary Romanian cinema.

Other studies have focused on the psychological consequences, represented in acoustic hallucinations, trauma, anxiety, of racial disparities (Mohamed, 2022; Garrett, 2023; Saxena, 2022; Benadla & Khalki, 2022; Enam & Sufian; Ben Amara, 2022).

Mohamed (2022) applied a psychoanalytic Lacanian approach to analyze acoustic hallucinations in Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange*. The study attributed acoustic hallucinations to the feelings of being part of an ethnic minority. Broadly, Garrett (2023) examined gender, race, class and the domestic abuse plotline as causes of psychological problems in ethnic minorities, as represented in fiction and cinema. The study evidently indicated that fiction and cinema view gender, race, class and the domestic abuse as factors that affect the psychology of individuals belonging to ethnic minorities.

Some works of fiction are based on characters belonging to ethnic minority groups. Such characters are presented as having fractured selves (Enam & Sufian). The fractured sense of self is caused by feelings of identity loss, trauma, and being under the control of social hegemony, as it is noted in *Native Son* and *The Bluest Eye* (Enam & Sufian). This phenomenon is also

represented in Fadia Faqir's *My Name Is Salma* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (Ben Amara, 2022).

METHODOLOGY:

In order to achieve the main objective of this study, which is represented in analyzing the ethnic minority psychology in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, the descriptive analytical method was used. Moreover, the analysis was based on the Critical Race Theory (CRT) that allows the researchers to sketch the characters and make critical judgements about the on the basis of their racial category. The primary data was collected from the original text of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, while the supporting data was collected from journal articles, books and theses. The selection of sources depended on their relevance to the topic and their year of publication, as only the new sources published between 2020 and 2025 were relied upon.

Furthermore, the analysis was based on the argument that ethnic minorities, as represented in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, experience psychological problems due to their exposure to different types of harassment, exploitation and victimization in a society where minorities experience various forms of hardships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: An Overview

Anne Fadiman details the successes, trials, and tribulations of the Lee family, refugees from Laos, as they attempt to care and advocate for their daughter Lia. Shaped by the transitions experienced as a result of their refugee status, and held together by the experience of communal upheaval and social migration, the members of the family exhibit the common characteristics of those dealing with severe cultural changes. In addition, they lack economic resources and knowledge of Western medicine, attributes which all but compound the negative effects these cultural transitions exert on the Lee family. The healthcare relationship that eventually develops between the Lees and the accomplished medical staff of the MCMC is in many respects typical of the half-failed encounters - laden with anxiety and long on frustration and dissonance - that are so common in inter-ethnic medical encounters today. What illuminates the Lees' encounter is that, when juxtaposed with the book's objective reporting of the characters and events at MCMC, it gorgeously illustrates the profound respect and appreciation the Lee family had for the MCMC medical profession. The Lee family's difficulties in dealing with the principles and mechanisms of Western medicine are deeply rooted in the cultural gaps that exist between those two factions.

At the heart of Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is the tragic account of the Lees, Hmong refugees from Laos, their daughter, Lia

Lee, a child diagnosed with severe epilepsy, and the challenges in providing constructive and respectful medical attention in the face of extreme cultural and language barriers. The Lee family's struggles with the American medical establishment are particularly poignant due to their attempts to deal with their daughter's disease in accordance with their beliefs and rituals. The bitter differences that play out between the Lees and their daughter's medical caregivers is no less than a drama of cross-cultural misunderstanding deeply rooted in profound differences in the way the two parties view life and society. At the heart of the dispute are issues surrounding culturally victimized families and the medical system's responsibility for understanding and appreciating the beliefs, values, and traditions of these families. Furthermore, Lia's case exemplifies the experiences of many Asian American immigrant families who have had harsh encounters with the American medical system.

Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is a book about the conflict between a small county hospital in California and a refugee family from Laos over the care of Lia Lee, a Hmong child diagnosed with severe epilepsy. Lia's parents and her doctors both wanted what was best for Lia, but the belief systems held by each side made it difficult to understand each other. The book examines the overarching question of the conflict between the Hmong people and the US medical system: How can the Western society serve as advocates for families from other cultures that are currently not being served well by the healthcare system. Those who treated the Asians were not taught how to deal with the Hmong problems. So, when the 3-month-old Lia was once admitted to the Emergency (ED) Room, it caused attention to the 4-5-year-old case. The Hmong's lives were revolving around their resources, their eating, their thinking, and their understanding. When Lia got ill, everything seemed as a problem to them. They could not use any of their herbal methods to cure her sickness, so that morning they decided to trust the doctors for help. The Hmong believed that the only reason why Lia was sick was because of them leaving Laos. Fairee Lee, Lia's mom never experienced living under America or the stress that came along with it, that is why to her nothing made any sense. She didn't really want a doctor to understand why Lia actually had her seizures, she just wanted her seizures to be cured. But even here when she tries to converse with the doctors, the first interpreting of both the medical words and the Hmong tends to be difficult for them. These parents had to sacrifice the bills and most things in their life just to pay and save a stranger who they felt would help them pay and save their daughter. Followed by the Lee's, many other cases appeared. At a time when rarities are medical problems, Fadiman had a rare opportunity to learn more than any other American about what it was that truly made the Hmong different or what made them the same.

Results related to the first question: To what extent is the psychology of the ethnic minority in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* affected by the cultural practices of the majority?

The ethnic minority in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is represented by the character of Lia and her family who belong to the Hmong community. Lia's family believe not in the medications prescribed at hospitals but in the traditional methods of healing which have mythological backgrounds.

Lia was diagnosed with epilepsy. This illness required special medications. However, in Hmong culture, it denotes a condition called *qaug dab peg*, or in a sense the separation of the soul from the body. Believing in this ideology, Lia's family began treating her using *tvix neeb*s, or shamans, an attempt that may, according to the Hmong culture, reunite body and soul. Furthermore, prescribed medications, according to the Hmong people, have negative side effects. This wrong belief provoked Lia's family not to administer the full doses of the necessary treatments. These cultural practices resulted in Lia's medical decline as she ultimately suffered a tonic-clonic seizure, making the whole family in a state of depression and hopelessness. Notably, the doctors who prescribed medications for Lia were non-Hmong, and this was among the reasons that provoked Lia's family to ignore the prescribed medications. This result is consistent with (Mohamed, 2022; Garrett, 2023; Saxena, 2022; Benadla & Khalki, 2022; Enam & Sufian; Ben Amara, 2022)

Results related to the second question: What are the key incidents that reveal how entrenched power structures enforce a singular narrative of health and illness?

Lia's family were hesitant to administer the doses prescribed by Lia's medical team who kept watching in horror as the poor girl suffered repeated grand mal seizures. The family's ignorance of the prescribed medications was the real cause of Lia's health decline. This negative attitude made Lia suffer for the rest of her life, thus becoming a victim of an ethnic minority belief. This point was highlighted in the works of other researchers like (Mohamed, 2022; Garrett, 2023; Saxena, 2022; Benadla & Khalki, 2022; Enam & Sufian; Ben Amara, 2022)

Lia Lee's medical journey, alongside the spiritual and emotional challenges faced by her parents and sisters, spans over a decade in Merced, California. This narrative not only provides insight into the history and culture of the Hmong people but also delves into the psychological dimensions of their experience. It offers a nuanced look at the Lee family's dynamic, their interactions with American social service agencies, and the intricate web of healthcare disparities they encounter.

Results related to the third question: What are the implications of these disparities on the psychological well-being of the family?

As a result of not administering all the prescribed doses, Lia entered a vegetative state at the age of four. This tragedy caused much trouble to the family who spent 26 years washing, carrying and feeding Lia. Despite this, the family continued their approach to healing, as a *tvix neeb* performed a ceremony for Lia every year.

The language barrier was compounded by the fact that the Lee family's culture placed their daughters in a secondary role. Lao, the younger Lee daughter, served as the primary caretaker of her sister, Lia. Lao had to translate the words for various body parts and functions and interpret the medical terminology for her parents. Lao was not able to fulfill these functions due to Lydia's lack of attention to her patient education role, and due to the cacophony of sound around Lia's hospital crib among other reasons offered by Fadiman. However, the fact that the Lees were culturally oriented and limited by language barriers became glaringly clear through this direction. Indeed, even the author, Fadiman, was unable to compete with language problems, taking the case of her young inexperienced interpreter to meddle with so occult religious practices of "the process of healing with a *txiv neeb*" (Yang, 1998. P. 4). This point agrees with (Mohamed, 2022; Garrett, 2023; Saxena, 2022; Benadla & Khalki, 2022; Enam & Sufian; Ben Amara, 2022)

Language barriers were a significant challenge for the Lees. Nao Kao, the elder Lees, and all of the younger children spoke little English. Only Foua Lee, the mother, understood English. Unfortunately, when she tried to act as an interpreter, she was also not proficient in English. When the Lees did not grasp an English word, their first instinct was to state "I don't know" rather than the more common lexicographic strategy of asking for clarification or repeating the word in various forms or tenses as many Americans do. Consequently, the Lees were labeled as noncompliant because of communication failures. Sue (1999) regrets the dominant philosophy of science that 'downplays cultural phenomena and ethnic minority groups, and concern with internal rather than external validity in psychological.' (p. 410) Sue (2009) quotes John Darley, in his Presidential Address to the Association for Psychological Science, stating that the interference of culture and social context of the community adds to the complication of empirical research in psychological fields

Results related to the fourth question: To what extent do the Western medical world and Hmong culture, as represented in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, clash?

Providing an equal level of interventions for ethnic minorities is not enough. To assume that what

works for the majority population will work for ethnic minorities is a dangerous assumption. Recognizing the often historical and current catastrophes faced by ethnic minority groups, culturally sensitive services need to be promoted and adapted to meet their unique needs. Ethnic minority groups should be able to obtain the same quality and level of culturally sensitive services as mainstream populations. It is not a matter of whether we should appreciate differences, but rather why we often do not.

Ethnic minority psychology refers to the focus on enhancing the quality of life and improving mental health and well-being among culturally and linguistically diverse populations. One of the overarching goals of ethnic minority psychology is the promotion of appreciation and understanding of the rich and unique cultural heritage and identity of ethnic minorities, as well as the examination of the dynamics of power and privilege related to ethnicity and culture that directly or indirectly influence the provision and quality of services. This point agrees with (Mohamed, 2022; Garrett, 2023; Saxena, 2022; Benadla & Khalki, 2022; Enam & Sufian; Ben Amara, 2022).

In a utopian world, individuals of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds would be valued and appreciated for their differences, and the knowledge and findings gained from cultural and ethnic diversity would be the cornerstone of collaborative studies and interactions across settings and disciplines.

There are hundreds of ethnic minority groups in the United States and throughout the world. It is commonly accepted that there are simply too many groups to mention, but the subjective and expanding nature of these categories can too easily hide the individual's identity in broad definitions. Current and historical distinctions between different groups often lead to stereotypes and prejudices and are closely associated with misunderstandings and intergroup conflicts.

CONCLUSION

The Spirit Catches You and You Will Fall Down is set against the backdrop of a hospital in the Midwest. It tells the story of the struggles of a displaced community grappling with the aftermath of a secret war in Laos and the dedicated efforts of doctors, anthropologists, and translators attempting to provide care. Cultural insensitivity and miscommunication exacerbate medical frustrations and often lead to heartbreaking outcomes, particularly for a child suffering from severe and recurring epilepsy.

Prescribed medications, according to the Hmong people, have negative side effects. This wrong belief made Lia's family ignore the full doses of the necessary treatments. These cultural practices resulted in Lia's medical decline as she ultimately suffered a tonic-clonic seizure, making the whole family in a state

of depression and hopelessness. The family's ignorance of the prescribed medications was the real cause of Lia's health decline. This negative attitude made Lia suffer for the rest of her life, thus becoming a victim of an ethnic minority belief.

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down is more than just a tragic tome about a refugee family's child falling into a coma. Far more significantly, within its pages, Anne Fadiman elucidates deep cultural meaning systems. These profound teachings possess the power to drive a people onto the fiery roads of a civil war. A sometimes eerie, sometimes quaint, but always intense ethnography of the Lee family's collision with the culture and the reality of American life is what Fadiman's book sheds considerable light upon.

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down reveals itself as an excellent example of a complimentary text as well. Commentaries, narratives, first-person accounts, case examples, biographies, and other stories written by and/or about a variety of people representing different cultural backgrounds or lifestyles are underused resources in the literature .

Being the first work to to analyze the psychology of ethnic minority in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, this study is a unique addition to the existing knowledge on social, ethnic, cultural and psychoanalytical aspects. Furthermore, it paves the way for other researchers and enlightens them to carry out studies on similar topics.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Carrying out further psychoanalytical studies using different theories of psychoanalysis like Kohut's theory of self psychology, thus providing deeper understanding of the psychological structure of ethnic minorities.
2. Applying the theory of self-object needs to analyze the characters of Lia and her family.
3. Carrying out more studies on other works of fiction using the theories suggested in the above recommendations.

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