

Japanese Pop Culture's Influence on the Process of Transnational Children's Identity Identification in "Monstrous" Graphic Novel

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Abstract

Monstrous is an autobiographical comic created by Sarah Myer, narrating her experiences as a South Korean descendant adopted by a German family who was living in America. The struggle of value differences between oneself, family, and school environment is a dilemma faced by transnational individuals. While struggling to identify her identity, Sarah was referencing Japanese pop culture to express herself and connect with her peer groups. This research utilizes a semiotic analysis method combined with literature review analysis. The semiotic theory used is Roland Barthes' theory, which seeks meaning from the collection of signs within the work. To elucidate the meanings found in semiotic analysis, literature review through social identity theories is required for the observed phenomena to be understood. Through this research, in pop culture, especially through fictional characters, there is cultural hegemony of other countries that can influence the formation of transnational individual identities. This is because individuals perceive the application of fictional character values as signs to form perceptions and judge others. The relationship between state hegemony can pose a challenge for transnational individuals in forming identities through popular culture. The challenge is in the form of isolation which occurred because moral and norm values attached in pop culture is different than standard moral and norm values in society and it clashed. Meanwhile, the history and relation between countries also have a significant role in the identity construction process of a society that form the state hegemony.

Keywords: Transnational Identity, Graphic Novel, Pop Culture

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Introduction

Pop culture has an important role to construct adolescent identity. Influence of pop culture can be dispersed through music, game, animation or sequential arts. In pop culture commodities there is a phenomena of media adaptation therefore it can be easily received by adolescents. Content inside of pop culture commodities can be a role model to construct their identity. Role model of identity can be obtained through creation of world building inside a narration which includes character designs, conflict, theme and background of the story (Park, 2024) In the creation of role models through sequential arts, it can be seen that the main characters have an important role due to confronting several different situations until they reach the ideal attitudes and dreams. The discovery of ideal attitudes can be inserted with morale or norm values that align with country ideology.

The process to find, develop and construct an identity can be clearly shown through autobiographical graphic novel or graphic memoirs. Inside of autobiographical graphic novel, the mental condition can be visualized through composition of panels, strokes, and art styles. The composition inside sequential arts can be an embodiment of self-identity. Particularly in autobiographical graphic novel, the comic artists need to design the character that represent themselves (McCloud, 1993).

The concept of self-representation demonstrated by comic artist to readers is an indicative of symbolic body expression. The body as a symbol can be describing age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, beauty, health and fashion within the character design (Refaie, 2013). Through the meaning of body within self-representation character in autobiographical graphic novel, readers can see the stereotypes of individuals. The meaning of self can stand alone because it is related with other people and environments. There are 2 aspects that need to be considered such as internal self (health, physical and genetic) and the judgment from other people as external self. The relation of those aspect is reciprocal (Hidya Tjaya, 2014).

The tittle of autobiographical graphic novels that was observed in this research is *Monstrous* created by Sarah Myer. *Autobiographical graphic novel* has 272 pages that narrated the experience of Sarah Myer who is an orphan from South Korea. She was adopted by Germany family and live in the United States of America (USA). Sarah adopted when she was a baby, therefore she unable to recognize her biological parents. Sarah grew up with pop culture that she consumed through comics, animation series and cinema. Difference of race between Sarah and her stepparents in the beginning of graphic novel was not considered as important matters. However, when people around Sarah judged her, Sarah started to question her identity. The question about identity emerged because Sarah has physical differences with other children. Sarah feels hurted because she unable to adapt with society standard around her.

Fictional characters used by Sarah as reference to express her existence and she also utilized it as safe spaces from the bullying that was experienced by her. Position of pop cultures as a safe space form transnational children replaced religion and role of parent guidance in postmodern society. Postmodern condition defined by Jean Francois Lyotard is a collapsed condition of metanarrative to provide universal truth. In postmodern condition, alternate narratives are offered as a medium to deliver message about human independency (Storey, 2021; Lyotard, 1984).

Sarah, with her South Korean background, faces a complex dilemma due to her step-parents' German cultural heritage and their American living environment. This situation epitomizes the challenge of being a transnational individual — someone expected to navigate and pledge allegiance to multiple countries. Balancing ties to her homeland while adapting to her adopted country is a simultaneous and ongoing process for her.

The research aims to address the question: “How does Japanese pop culture play a significant role in the development of transnational adolescents, and how do comic artists' efforts to adapt values from Japanese pop culture serve as a reference for ideal identity?”

Research Method

The research was conducted through a semiotics method to address the meaning of text within autobiographical graphic novels. After semiotics analysis, the meaning of text was defined through literature studies that related with social identity theories. Semiotics method is an analytic method that is conducted through interpretation of several patterns or a comparison of signs. Semiotics theory used in this research is based on Roland Barthes. Roland Barthes identified a meaning through signifiers and signified. The signs that occurred several times can be seen as a set of signs inside of graphic novel pages.

In the purpose of observing the repetition of signs, pages in graphic novels can be positioned as lexicon. Lexicon is a set of signs that create a simplified narration. The group of lexicon can be divided as several steps of growth from transnational individuals such as toddler, child, adolescent, and young adult. Growing steps from Sarah's character can be found through pages that show changes of hairstyle and her taste in pop culture products. Based on growing steps there were efforts by Sarah to identify what kind of character was suitable as reference for the identity construction process. Identification in constructing identity defined by Charles Brenner in psychoanalysis research is experience of an individual to understand objects, other people and environment which need to be adapted (Brenner, 1974).

In every Individual there are 3 layers of consciousness: id, ego and superego. The Id represents a collection of wishes and dreams, the ego embodies rationality and perception of reality lastly superego encompasses feelings of guilt. During the identification process, members of a group use leader values as their reference of superego. Demand and ambition of the leader became a standard of rules within a group or community. The figures of leaders that can serve as identification models are religion leader, parents, community leader or fictional characters within pop culture commodities. The observation about identification process conducted by Sarah can be shown through following pages:



Figure 1: Sarah's Difficulties in Getting Along in Any Play Group

The toddlerhood phase of Sarah can be depicted from page 6 to page 56. During toddlerhood, Sarah's stepparent introduced the Mermaid cartoon through cinema. Sarah is interested in mermaids because they have supernatural abilities compared to other toys. Aside from mermaids, Sarah also liked Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles characters. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is a group of mutant turtles who fight evil and live in the sewer. Sarah chose to mimic Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle as inspiration because it is unique compared to other toys which is considered as normal standard. The interest of Sarah for certain figures was not welcomed by her peer group. Because she didn't get a good response from other girls, Sarah tried to befriend a boy's peer group. When Sarah played with the boy's peer group, she realized that she didn't fit with their style of play. On the toddlerhood stage, Sarah's friends and toys selection were divided by sex categories; other differences such as race and ideology are not considered as important points.



Figure 2: Classification of Roles According to Physical Appearance

Sarah's childhood is shown in page 56 to page 137. In her childhood, Sarah had interest in varieties of Japanese's pop culture. Sarah played along with Power Ranger's characters and mimicked Sailor Moon anime hairstyle. Power Ranger is a TV series with an action genre about a group of young adults who fight evils for justice. Within the series, one of the artists has the physical appearance of an Asian person and acted as Power Ranger Yellow. The signs of Asian people were depicted through yellow as a symbol of Asian people's skin color. Sarah was forced to choose Power Ranger Yellow by her friends because she had a similar background, however Sarah disagreed with her friend's suggestion.

Furthermore, Sailor Moon's main character named Usagi Tsukino also became Sarah's inspiration. In the Sailor Moon animation series, Usagi Tsukino is the main character who has a background as a celestial being from the moon. When Usagi Tsukino lived on Earth, she disguised herself to be a normal school student who fought an evil organization to protect her friends. Sarah adapted the idea of a celestial being disguised as a normal person, because she also feels different from her friends, and it is also from Japan. Sarah thought Japan animation can replace South Korea as cultural representative reference because it has similar origin which is from East Asia. When Sarah stated Usagi Tsukino was her reference model, Sarah's friends disagreed because the character has blonde hair which is not incline with Sarah's physical appearance. In the childhood stage, Sarah has difficulty identifying her race background and her friends are also very aware of Sarah's differences. Although Sarah identified as a person from East Asia, the origin country of Sarah still not considered important point in the childhood stage.



Figure 3: Other People's Responses to Sarah's Cosplay Costumes

The adolescent hood of Sarah can be seen in page 138 to 185. In adolescence, Sarah tried to participate in cosplay activities in a Japanese pop culture festival. The participation of Sarah in the Japanese Pop Culture festival got a good response from another participant, however Sarah's background as a South Korean person when she played as Ash (Satoshi) from Pokémon animation series has a different meaning for certain people. People who realized Pokémon animation series are from Japan, therefore they look at Sarah as an imposter. When Sarah was an adolescent, the hegemonic power of South Korea was not powerful. South Korea when Sarah was an adolescent was a developing country that had been colonized by Japan. Certain people also have stereotypes about Korean women, which was an entertainer used by the Japanese military during the colonial era. Negative label of Korean women became a bullying source obtained by Sarah.



Figure 4: Awareness of Sexual Attraction

Sarah's young adulthood phase shown in page 185 to 254. In this phase, Sarah felt an identity crisis because norm and moral values within herself were different from other people. In this phase. Sarah used Evangelion as her identity reference, especially from the main character named Shinji Ikari. Evangelion is an anime about 3 adolescents which are Shinji Ikari, Rei Ayanami and Asuka Langley Soryu. They piloted giant mechs called Evangelion to defeat enemies who threaten humanity. The heavy burden carried by adolescents creates tension in its narration. Existential discourse in Evangelion is the main topic of the story because Shinji Ikari needs to construct his own values although his environment demands him to defeat enemies. Sarah mimicking Shinji Ikari fashion style and adapting Evangelion series values for her daily life. In this phase, cosplaying was not only a hobby, but it became a statement.

In young adulthood, Sarah realized she had her own values and accepted herself as queer. However, this acceptance also stirred feelings of resentment towards her social environment. Sarah's struggle to construct her own identity began to improve as she accepted the traumas from her childhood. She acknowledged being mentally wounded by her environment and sought support from her close friends and family. The decision to seek help after experiencing harm from her environment was key to Sarah's healing.

Result

Pop culture offer support for transnational individuals to identify different values between oneself and environment. The support can be started from the toddlerhood phase when an individual experienced an interest in media contents. Identification process through pop culture is an experiment conducted more than one times. When the experiment conducted, other people have a role as a judge toward a values that suitable to be adapted by someone, From the presentation of Sarah's story in an autobiographical graphic novel, the growth phase of Sarah and several signs can be found. The signs are divided into signifiers and signified based on Roland Barthes's semiotic theory. The list of the phase and signs can be illustrated through this graph:

Table 1: The Sign and Signifiers Found in “Monstrous” Graphic Novel

Growth Stage	signifier 1	signifier 2	signified
Toddler	Mermaid Pictures and TMTT Toys	Worried about getting along in a play group	Gender identification markers
Childhood	Power ranger and Sailor moon role play	Classification of roles according to race in playgroups	Racial identification markers in social interactions
Adolescence	Cosplay activities and anime pop culture festivals	Other people's responses to cosplay costumes	Signs of hegemonic identification
Young Adult	identity crisis and daily clothing style choices	Awareness of sexual attraction	Self value identification marker

Gender identification phase can be shown in Sarah’s toddlerhood, she played mermaid and TMTT toys. Sarah as a toddler tried obtained the reference for her identity from pop culture commodities, Sarah also utilized it as connector with her friends. Sarah’s friends taste for the toys was divided by duality of gender, girls and boys.

Construction of stereotypes through played toys by girls was a princess doll. From the toys, the toddler could acknowledge the values of ideal girls. The values consist of taste about fashion, manners, and ideal home. On the other hand, TMTT consists of the expectation of boyhood, which is active to solve problems and have adventures in rough ways to show masculinity. In the aim to construct self-identity, an individual has pure perception as blank papers in the beginning. The concept of blank papers is aligned with the John Locke concept named Tabula Rasa. However, interaction with society makes an individual realize about existence of self. In the beginning, the judgment about self is obtained from other people’s taste such as parents, friends, school environment.

Based on interactionist theories by Mead and Cooley, the concept about identity construction is also influenced by culture in society. Identity constructed through communication and participation in society. The communication and participation acts occurred several times in 1 period (Burke & Stets, 2023).

In her childhood, Sarah played as a member of Power Rangers with her peer group. In the Power Ranger narration as a pop culture product, there was an effort to grant a label to other people. Grant of labels occurred in the role of power ranger, the red ranger is Caucasian as the leader, the blue ranger is Caucasian with high intelligence, pink ranger is Caucasian with beauty. Other rangers such as yellow and black played by minorities, black ranger by black person who has strong power and yellow ranger as an Asian person with martial arts skills. Based on Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy, labelling is an effort to acknowledge strangers through generalization which is equal to totalization of other people's identity.

The disagreement with totalization by society can result in exclusion even though it is also an effort to maintain self-existence. The exclusion can occur to an individual who is different

from people's perception. An individual can feel interiority when deserted by society, they will construct their personal goals which are different from the expectations of others. The institutionalized of totalization is exteriority which is the meaning of the environment created by society's perspective. In identity construction, interiority and exteriority has a reciprocal relationship through a discourse until it has an agreement.

Sarah feels that her exclusion is related with the narration in anime or manga, especially Sailor Moon. Through Sailor Moon's narration, Sarah felt safer and protected from her social environment because Sarah believes the narration of Sailor Moon is relatable with her daily life problem. Sailor Moon's character, Usagi Tsukino is an adopted daughter and lives as common people on Earth, specifically in Japan. Sarah positioned herself as Usagi Tsukino because they have similar identity as an adopted child in foreign country. However, Sailor Moon narration as an escape mechanism from society can become a double edge sword, because Usagi Tsukino has blonde hair which is uncommon for Asian people. Because Sarah has no physical attributes like Usagi Tsukino, Sarah is mocked by her friends. Sarah felt confused because manga originated from Japan, which is an East Asian country, the narration also has a Japanese environment setting therefore the main character is not visualized and has Japanese people attributes.

Hegemony identification can be seen in Sarah's adolescent phase. Hegemony operates in the form of expectations of society such as taste and perception which produce a meaning system. Experience and visualized practices become intertwined to confirm each other (Powers, 1973). In toddlerhood Sarah granted with Asian stereotype label, however, in the adolescent phase, the meaning becomes more complex and specific. The specific label can be seen at the scene in the graphic novel when Sarah cosplaying as Ash Ketchum (Satoshi), a character from anime and manga series called Pokémon.

The graphic novel establishes Sarah's South Korean background. This fact adds a layer of complexity to her cosplay of a Japanese anime character, considering the historical tension between the two countries (South Korea was a Japanese colony until 1945). As Sarah's friends point out, this clash of cultures becomes a source of mockery for Sarah. Sarah is labelled as a Korean comfort woman because she is seen as submissive to Japanese pop culture. South Korea's hegemony in the Monstrous autobiography graphic novel is not as strong as current conditions.

Clash of hegemonies between countries confirming pop cultures as a soft power. In the soft power of a country, there are hidden ideologies known as odorless culture. Ideologies disseminated through pop cultures can be portrayed in a form of mimesis. Sarah was also mocked because of the act of mimesis to other country's hegemony. In this context, hegemonies especially from countries who had historical tension become an obstacle for transnational individuals to construct their identity. It is due to the fact; transnational individuals always try to find the root of their heritage although the source has been deviated.

in Sarah's young adulthood phase. She identified herself as an anime character in Neon Genesis Evangelion named Shinji Ikari. The identification was established through mimicking Shinji Ikari's fashion style in this phase, Sarah's social environment did not grant her negative label anymore because Japanese pop culture had been acknowledged by society.

In her young adulthood, Sarah acknowledges her existence and constructs her own values independently of others' recognition. The notion to construct individual values mentioned by

Jean Paul Satre, he stated that self-existence is more important than essence. The existence of an individual is shaped by their actions and decisions, not by the label others assign to them. Sarah does not abandon her roots as a South Korean descendant; however, she ignores the social demands imposed on her by others.

Discussion

Taste can be shaped by the cultural environment of a society. Within identity construction, cultural unconsciousness plays a role in creating values within a country or specific region (Bourdieu, 1993). Cultural unconsciousness can be acquired by an individual who experiences dynamic movement. This dynamic cultural movement is evident in the shifting meaning of South Korean citizenship and the broader East Asian identity, influenced by the global impact of their pop culture development.

Fundamentally, race is a floating semiotic sign (Hall, 1997) that can evolve over time. This is evident in the case of Sarah, a South Korean descendant, who is continuously insulted by bullies during her adolescence. During the early 1990s to 2000s, South Korea's condition was still unrecognized by many people in America. From their perspective, South Korea was a developed country still in the phase of rebuilding after World War II.

Korean peninsula became independent in 1945 from Japan occupation. After South Korea Independency, the country led by a militaristic government that had an anti-communist ideology, USA gave financial support to establish a new South Korea government. However, the support that given by USA suspected to have subliminal interest to obtain control of South Korea government.

The attempt to control through the impact of financial support conducted by the USA caused a coup d'état led by Park Chung Hee's group. After the influences of Park Chung Hee recognized by USA, long term program to develop South Korea economy growth had been established. The long-term plan to develop economy growth was successful, so it named Miracle from the Han River (Byung Kook & Ezra F, 2011).

Hegemony clashes between countries inflict a difficulty to transnational children construct their identity, the phenomena can be visualized through Sarah's stories. Sarah couldn't acquire the language and culture of South Korea because the lack interactions with individuals who come from similar backgrounds. Sarah's identity construction can be different if South Korea hegemony when Sarah growth was already strong.

Pop culture as hegemony can grant references to identity construction however it also has influence to create isolation to individual. The isolation can be occurred because moral and norm values attached in pop culture is different than standard moral and norm values in society. Fictional character as pop culture element is a symbol that can be utilized in interaction. Believed fictional character can shape perception or impression for others.

Sarah's condition in the autobiography graphic novel titled *Monstrous* can be compared with graphic novels that raise similar issues such as *Be Prepared* created by Vera Brosgol in 2018. Within the *Be Prepared* graphic novel, parents' effort to introduce their child about homeland cultures can be portrayed in registering their child in scout. The scout group in the *Be prepared* graphic novel consists of migrated children from the same background.

In *Be Prepared* there are 3 steps of Vera as the main character who had transnational identity experienced identity seeking process. The steps of transnational children seeking their identity can be divided into 3 phases which are seeking recognition phase, mimicking phase and integrated phase (Johanes, 2023). However, the guidance in mimicking phase experienced by transnational children can be better if they have reference from an older person beside their parents as mentor. The reference can act as a mentor to directing transnational children how to confront the assimilation process in society. Mentors can also establish support groups to ensure transnational children have solidarity. To create solidarity, the transnational children need to obtain recognition of a new identity as “peranakan”, not recognition based on the ability to acquire original cultures and language from their homeland.

The establishment of support groups can bridge the gap that religion, parents, and pop culture cannot fill in the identity construction process of transnational children. In this process, parents must recognize that understanding societal conditions and media literacy is essential to facilitate discussions about cultural acculturation with their children.

Conclusion

The history and relation between countries have a significant role in the identity construction process of a society. Inside a country, individuals who have transnational identity confront additional difficulty in the form of moral and norm values clashing. The clash of values occurred within the self and stigma granted by the society environment.

The function of graphic novels as a medium of communication is very effective because it can visualize a condition that cannot be manifested physically such as development of mental condition, and steps to construct an identity. Although in the visualization through graphic novels, phenomena or conditions have been framed by certain individuals or groups. Based on the reason above, race stereotyping cannot be avoided in the creation of graphic novels. However, the existence of transnational identity in graphic novels can be counted as an effort to challenge creation of frame within the medium, therefore can stimulate further discussion and critical thinking of readers.

Inside of an autobiography graphic novel which discusses issues about transnationality, the reader can understand the process of acculturation of everyone can be different. The result can also be different from an individual who joined different social groups. The acculturation result can be influenced by the condition of social group, possessed expertise, and character expectation in one environment. In the theory stated by John W. Berry, acculturation strategy can be divided by several point such as assimilation, integration, marginalization and separation (Sam & Berry, 2006). Through graphic novels, the result of acculturation can be visualized clearly.

In the graphic novel "*Monstrous*," the acculturation strategy repeatedly manifests, becoming an integral layer of Sarah's experiences. These interconnected experiences significantly shape Sarah's decisions at each stage of her identity construction process, while also contributing to her trauma.

The resolution of Sarah's story illustrates that she not only embraced differing opinions from others, but also discovered a solution to her identity construction dilemma through the acknowledgment of her mental health. Her realization and acceptance of her mental condition

played a pivotal role in this process. Sarah seeks support and establishes a support group from her friends in the young adulthood phase.

This research has limitations in interpreting meaning due to its exclusive reliance on sociological literature. In addition to interpreting signs through the semiotic method, it is essential to consider the biological condition of the main character. Furthermore, the study requires updated information on the current hegemonic positions of relevant countries, such as the USA, Japan, South Korea, and Germany. Comparing these contemporary hegemonic positions with their historical counterparts will provide a more comprehensive analysis.

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