

Cinematic Representations of South Koreans in North America: Cultural Identity under Migration

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Errata List

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Page/ Paragraph	Original Text	Corrected Text
P. 3 / STRUCTURE	“introduces narrative and film <u>analysis</u> as the methodologies employed”	“introduces narrative and film <u>analyses</u> as the methodologies employed”
P. 7 / South Koreans in North America	“has been driven by <u>education</u> , economic opportunities, and quality-of-life aspirations”	“has been driven by <u>educational</u> , economic opportunities, and quality-of-life aspirations”
P. 11 / Labor	“ <u>Upon</u> arriving in a” (additional space before Upon)	“ <u>Upon</u> arriving in a”
P. 12 / Family	“Additionally, <u>among</u> traditional Korean parenting”	“Additionally, traditional Korean parenting” (delete among)
P. 17-18 / Application of the framework	“family, <u>work</u> , tensions”	“family, <u>labor</u> , tensions” (to be changed also in fig. 2)
P. 19 / METHODOLOGY	“what <u>film</u> have been chosen”	“what <u>films</u> have been chosen”
P. 29 / Riceboy Sleeps	“a Korean single <u>mother migrant</u> ”	“a Korean single <u>migrant mother</u> ”
P. 29 / Cultural Assimilation: Racism and Pressure	“it <u>will more</u> beneficial”	“it <u>will be more</u> beneficial”

Abstract

This thesis explores the negotiation of cultural identity under migration among South Koreans in North America through cinematic representations. Drawing on narrative identity theory, the thesis employs narrative and film analyses to examine three semi-biographical fiction films: *Minari* (2020), *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), and *Past Lives* (2023). It investigates how cultural identity is represented and further complicated and contested through narrative and storytelling. Key intersectional themes were highlighted across the films, including intergenerational conflict, family, work, gender and belonging. The findings demonstrate that acculturation is not a linear trajectory, but is shaped by historical context, class background, generational differences, and gendered expectations. In particular, the films reveal how encounters with a Korean ‘Other’ often function as turning points that force individuals to confront aspects of their cultural identity. This thesis argues that cultural identity is not a fixed, linear phenomenon, but rather a dynamic process. However, while migrants have active agency in shaping it, their choices remain constrained by broader socio-cultural conditions.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Migration, Acculturation, South Korea, North America, Film

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1. INTRODUCTION

“To be a migrant is to face all the lives we are not living and cannot ever live.”

(Wong, 2023)

Despite the common perception that migration is simply “the process of relocating from one country, region, or place of residence to establish oneself in another” (Jee, 2025, p. 3041), its complex facets go far beyond this simple interpretation. People involved in migration not only find themselves physically relocating, but also have to face a profound process of adaptation that revolves around cultural, social, and psychological factors (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025; Jee, 2025). In this pendulum of tensions that swings between the culture of origin and the host culture, identity emerges as one of the most impacted spheres of migrants’ experience. Barua and Maheshwari (2025) have identified migration as a “catalyst for rethinking and renegotiating one’s identity” (p. 1), where common experiences of identity crisis, ambiguity and alienation mark the process of cultural shift. Within this context, where both personal and collective forces come into play, identity is a fundamental resource for better understanding the complexity of diaspora and the resulting social challenges that may arise. Maintaining connections to the homeland while adapting to a new society often produces ambivalence and identity tensions (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025).

South Korea largely contributed to the migration wave that affected North America following the American Immigration Reform Act of 1965 and the Canadian Immigration Policy of 1966 (Lee & Kim, 2021). The tumultuous political and economic decades and the already established relations between Korea and The United States contributed to this phenomenon, as many were seeking new opportunities (Lee, 2015; Lee & Kim, 2021). The Korean diaspora, however, has also created a widening gap between Korean migrants and Koreans living in the country, mainly due to the homogenous nature of its cultural identity (Lee & Kim, 2021; Lim, 2009). Through their adaptation processes, individuals have begun to shift apart from what traditional society considers “Korean”, questioning then what a Korean cultural identity implies.

In this vacuum in which migrants find themselves, the use of storytelling, either visual or narrative, plays an important role in navigating the self, by offering a way to understand and reshape social norms (De Fina, 2003). With the increase in the number of migrants in Korea, recent years have also seen an emergence of a self-expression cinematic scene dedicated to migrants (De Fina, 2003, p. 4). Self-representations of migrant identity remain less explored than mainstream depictions of migration. Moreover, while much of cinema focuses on migration within the country, less attention

is given to the formation of migrants' cultural identity outside of Korea, for instance in North America. The use of narrative is extremely helpful for developing and understanding the relationship between cultural identity formation and migration, how these two realities interact and what more can be said about the personal experiences of migrants.

1.1 Research Aim and Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how cultural identity is negotiated and shaped within the context of Korean migration. To achieve this, the research intends to understand this phenomenon through contemporary cinematic representations of Koreans who have relocated in North America. Films represent both a narrative space situated at the crossroad of migration and identity, and a means to access communities and individuals, as they represent the most feasible and convenient form of production of the self (De Fina, 2003; Kim, 2017). Films can serve different purposes; they can help draw attention to conditions of inequality and discrimination, or they can help reaffirm and secure migrants' identities (Kim, 2017). This thesis seeks to contribute to established studies on migration and cultural identity, by bringing a new perspective through films. It is essential to broaden the scope of the studies by including other forms of expression, such as cinema, which contribute to the process of migrants' experience, since the simple expression of experience is an integral part of the experience itself (De Fina, 2003, p.5). Moreover, the focus on Koreans migrated to North America contribute to an emerging field of migration studies revolving around South Korea. While most research focuses on migrants within Korea, other studies also draw attention to the difficulties Koreans themselves encounter in other countries. Although cultural identity is a central aspect of other research, less attention is paid to its expression, particularly in the visual media.

To proceed with the analysis, this thesis poses the main research question: "What do cinematic representations of South Koreans in North America inform us about cultural identity under migration?".

Three sub-questions guide the analysis:

1. How are South Korean migrants' identities represented?
2. What dimensions of cultural identity emerge as contested or unstable in these migrant representations?
3. How do these cinematic representations rearticulate or complicate existing theoretical understandings of cultural identity in migration studies?

1.2 Structure

The thesis proceeds as follows: the second chapter presents the literature review, focusing on the conceptualization of cultural identity and how migration can act as a catalyst for its changes. Moreover, it discusses in more detail the socio-cultural spheres that have emerged as contested. Next, the analytical framework of narrative identity is presented, outlining the core elements of the analysis. The fourth chapter then introduces narrative and film analysis as the methodologies employed for the research, including the data selection criteria and ethical considerations. Chapter five delves into the findings and analyses of the three selected films, highlighting key themes such as intergenerational conflict, cultural assimilation, and family. Finally, the thesis ends with a discussion followed by a conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the key bodies of literature that inform the analysis of cultural identity under migration in contemporary South Korean diasporic cinema. It first outlines how cultural identity has been conceptualized within identity studies, examining then scholars' perspectives on cultural identity under migration, focusing on South Korea's case. Lastly, the chapter highlights two key socio-cultural spheres relevant to the negotiation of identity: gender and tensions between home and host society.

2.1 Conceptualizing Cultural Identity

The rise and spread of the notion of identity in social sciences discourses began in the 1960s in the United States and it was linked to increasing academic attention to new concepts such as race, class, gender and identity crisis (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Despite these new variables were highlighted, the issue that emerged consequently, according to Brubaker and Cooper (2000), revolved around the overuse of the term identity. What emerged was that what each scholars meant when discussing identity depended heavily on the context of its use and it often implied problematic assumptions. For instance, some scholars considered identity to be a collective phenomenon while others viewed it as a product of political or social actions, assuming that identity is either something all people possessed, or that collective identity implied a strong notion of group boundedness (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000).

Although not all identity scholars agree with Brubaker and Cooper's argument about the overuse of the term identity, a shared perspective is that it's a complex notion and it's merely impossible to find a neutral definition for it (De Fina, 2003). On a more superficial level, identity can be considered as something that distinguishes the individual from the 'Other', including elements that define the truth of a being, like a person's name or sex, and the way we identify ourselves (Al-Yasri, 2021; Barua & Maheshwari, 2025). However, what shapes the concept of identity goes far beyond this simple understanding, since, as Hall (1990) suggests, identity is not as straightforward as we may believe. Despite the assumption that it's something static and simply accomplished, identity is constantly being renavigated and reproduced, particularly through the interaction with the 'Other', by reflecting "what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall, 1996, p. 3). Consequently, identity can be understood as a 'production', whose process is never-ending and in constant re-evaluation to both internal and external variables and in which individuals play an active role in shaping it (De Fina, 2006). Identity is a self-concept that derives from an individual's awareness of his belongingness to a social group, where people can choose within an inventory of multiple compatible identities in accordance with the social circumstances in which they find themselves (De Fina, 2006). This breaks with the idea of

identity being a unified core of the individual and brings attention to the fact that it is not something biologically determined, but historically and culturally defined (Hall, 1993).

Considering that identity is a practical accomplishment, the constant interaction with the external allows individuals to redefine themselves. Identity is not unilateral and as the individual's own perception can only be completed through the outsider's perspective, the concept of identification emerges as crucial. Jenkins (2014) argues that identification operates at the boundary between the individual and the collective. He distinguishes between self-identification, referring to how individuals define themselves, and social identification, how individuals are defined by others. These two dimensions can't be considered separately, as the individual and the collective are "routinely entangled with each other" (p. 40). Therefore, he argues that identification is always from a point of view, whether internal or external, and is embedded in bodies, territories, or institutions.

Following this definition, scholars have started to address the concept of 'cultural identity' to better understand the weight that cultural settings have in defining identity. Hall (1990) argues there are two main ways of conceiving cultural identity. Firstly, having a shared history is pillar for defining cultural identity, as it provides individuals with a set of shared experiences and cultural codes that shape the form that identity can take. Therefore, he argues that there is a sort of "collective one true self" (p. 233) inside the many other selves of individuals with a shared history. Secondly, there are several variables that influence our cultural identity in the long-term. History plays a role of change in identity building underlining its transformative nature, since "like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation" (p. 225). Whether one prefers the first or the second case, scholars generally agree that cultural identity is constructed progressively through social and historical settings, where individuals become self-aware of their own culture through the interaction with the 'Other' (Jee, 2025; Jung & Lee, 2004). Since the notion is linked to social and historical contexts that are not fixed, cultural identity is also influenced by their changing nature. Consequently, cultural identity exists as a process of construction and re-formation that characterize the individual's life span, as there is no final identity to be reached (Bauman, 2011; Lee & Kim, 2021).

2.2 Cultural Identity under Migration

Through migration, individuals face uncertainties concerning their known social and cultural frameworks, triggering a process of adaptation (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025). This phenomenon is especially evident in the relation with the 'Other', as migration shows migrants how others see and categorize them, and this directly impacts their identity formation process. Barua and Maheshwari (2025) define migrants' cultural identity as something shaped by both interpersonal experiences and external forces, as well as a fluid and constantly evolving element. Although this description

emphasizes the role of external influences, Jee (2025) stresses the importance of recognizing the active role played by migrants. Indeed, individuals make choices about how they prefer to approach the host society, directly influencing their experience. This is particularly true in situations where the differences between migrants and the people from the host country are more apparent. For instance, skin color, manner of speaking or even clothing styles can create a distinction, often leading to marginalization and misunderstandings (Kim, 2017). Depending on their choices, experiences and social attitudes, different outcomes may emerge in the process of identity formation.

When navigating complex cultural landscapes, migrants undergo a process of acculturation, which occurs when individuals from different cultures come into contact, generating significant changes in the relationship between the native and host cultural identity (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025; Berry, 1997). While the former represents a bridge and a connection to one's roots, the latter can lead to achieving the status of a 'successful migrant', in which distinctions with the host society are eliminated (Kim, 2017; Park & Angelica, 2025).

In early studies, acculturation was seen as a process similar to assimilation, in which migrants abandon their original cultural values by absorbing those of the host society, therefore, assimilation was considered the only way to adapt (Kim & Hong, 2021). On the contrary, contemporary acculturation theory distances itself from this original idea by arguing that assimilation is not the only outcome of acculturation process, and that migrants don't necessarily lose their native cultural heritage (Kim & Hong, 2021, p. 185). Berry (1997) opens the debate on acculturation by first emphasizing the importance of understanding the position of the migrants involved. Whether they are voluntary or involuntary immigrants, the level of difficulty and the consequent outcomes can vary extensively, despite the common process of adaptation. For instance, voluntary migrants present themselves as more willing to pursue assimilation than involuntary ones (Yoon, 2006). However, this varies depending on the host country's reception to the migrant's attempt, whether it welcomes or imposes forms of acculturation. Therefore, Berry (1997) distinguishes four main strategies of acculturation:

- Assimilation: individuals belonging to the non-dominant group refuse to maintain their cultural identity, preferring to interact with and assimilate into the host culture.
- Separation: individuals choose to maintain their native culture, rejecting any interactions with the host culture.
- Integration: individuals find a balance between maintaining their original cultural identity and actively interacting with the host culture.

- Marginalization: individuals show no effort or interest to maintaining their original cultural identity and interacting with the host society.

The strategy chosen are based on the assumptions that migrants can choose freely, but this is not often the case. Sometimes, the dominant group imposes assimilation or segregation, resulting in a disrupted identity formation. On the other hand, if the host society is open and inclusive, integration can be pursued freely, as the level of prejudice and marginalization is minimal (Berry, 1997). Migrants whose cultural values and patterns are welcomed and approved by the dominant society are more likely to adapt successfully than those whose cultural traits are considered inferior (Yoon, 2006).

The process of acculturation is part of a bigger context that constitutes diaspora, a process of settlement and adaptation linked to a larger transnational migratory movement (Anthias, 1998). Diaspora identities emerge through the constant negotiation between homeland connection and adaptation in the host society (Anthias, 1998). Other academics even go to the extent of defining a bi-cultural identity formation, a hybrid form of cultural identity where elements from both societies coexist (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025).

2.2.1 South Koreans in North America

South Korea has been one of the largest contributors to worldwide emigration, creating a layered and complex diaspora network. South Korean migration to North America has been driven by education, economic opportunities, and quality-of-life aspirations (Yoon, 2022). However, the complex nature of the diaspora shows that each wave was driven by different factors, often linked to the situation in Korea at the time (Yoon, 2006). Over the decades that have characterized this phenomenon, the perception surrounding the country has also changed considerably, and consequently so has the approach of host countries towards Koreans.

The general idea surrounding Korea is that its society is united by a unique Korean identity that shapes the homogenous nature of the country (Lim, 2009). This national identity is defined by race and ethnicity, but being Korean on a paper is not enough to be recognized as such. It is crucial to know and embrace its values, norms, mindset and cultural traditions, reasons why Koreans living abroad find it difficult to reintegrate into Korean society (Lim, 2009, p. 1). Limited fluency in Korean can create feeling of alienation and ambiguity toward Korean identity (Oh, 2018). Moreover, the different nature between Asian and Western culture creates a tension that is further accentuated by age, gender roles, and family hierarchy (Jung & Lee, 2004).

Exposure to cultural practices, white-dominated environments, and racial discrimination in social experiences are important elements that impact the formation of Korean migrants' identity in

North America (Jee, 2025). First generations of migrants, who have a stronger sense of belonging to Korea, are able to maintain it, as they often arrive in a new country with a strong sense of cultural collective identity and create communities to help themselves maintain it (Lee & Kim, 2021). On the other hand, later generations find it more difficult to adapt, often resulting in lower self-esteem and different preferences for acculturation (Lee & Kim, 2021). Research conducted in Canada by Yoon (2022) among young Koreans immigrants shows a shared desire to be ‘fully Canadians’, and a rejection of their Korean identity in early stages of life. Furthermore, the non-dominant group felt compelled to assimilate, by adhering to dominant norms of behavior for instance. These different strategies were motivated by the fear of living as “forever foreigners” (p. 33) in Canada, after experiencing discrimination and racialization during their formative years. Participants, however, recall that witnessing more appreciation for Korea, thanks in part to the Korean Wave phenomenon, has helped them in reconnecting with their native cultural identity.

The cultural identity that emerges in this context is often considered as a dual identity, which emphasizes the cultural origins as well as the collective experience of being a migrant in the host society (Yoon, 2006). Moreover, this in-betweenness is not always considered a sign of a weaker cultural identity, but for Korean migrants can represent a source of pride. Oh (2018) through the analysis of his own experience, argues that the production of a multifaceted identity can be perceived as a way of empowerment in the face of oppression.

2.2.2 North American Cultural Identity

Despite their close geographical proximity and similar history, The United States and Canada differ in various respects, including their ideologies, specifically between individualism and collectivism (Baer et al., 1993). Over the decades, American identity has been shaped around concepts of individualism, liberalism and ethnoculturalism (Kann, 1990, p. 46; Schildkraut, 2007). All three concepts have defined the image that America projects, specifically related to the American dream and its appeal to migrants. Despite this narrative, ethnoculturalism emphasizes how the focus relies on only English-speaking Protestants of North European ancestry, therefore excluding completely the cultural multiplicity that characterizes the country (Schildkraut, 2007, p. 599), whose growing diversity has begun to challenge what it means to be American and what values this entails.

On the other hand, Canada’s identity is reflected above all in its multiculturalism, regarded to be a “fundamental characteristic of Canadian heritage and identity” (Howard-Hassmann, 1999, p. 526). Yet, there is a set of common and shared elements that constitute Canadian identity, including a shared experience within the country, ways of living and values (Howard-Hassmann, 1999, p. 527). Becoming Canadian is not an easy process for immigrants, as differences in food preferences,

physical features or accents create a gap in how Canadians think of themselves. As exemplified by Bannerji's argument, race and ethnicity represent prominent aspect of the identity of all Canadians, a view reinforced by the mistreatment of minorities over the decades, suggesting then an impossibility for migrants to feel Canadians (Howard-Hassmann, 1999, p. 533).

What both countries have in common is the pursuit of the American dream, considered to be "the cultural expression of North American identity" (Știuliuc, 2011, p. 364). Despite the common narrative of success in pursuing the American dream, the reality showcases that many migrants face challenges upon moving to North America. The immigrant experience is marked by sense of placelessness, finding oneself in a hostile environment, and a discrepancy between one's insufficient resources and the abundance of goods offered by the host country (Știuliuc, 2011, p. 366). As a result, migrants struggle to achieve success in their American dream, often because the system itself was not designed for them in the first place.

North American cultural identity is shaped by deeply embedded racial and gendered norms, which constitute key sites of tension for migrants. Historically, minorities in North America, such as Black and Asian people, were excluded from civic life and were mainly involved in cheap labor, particularly in southern regions (Kim, 1999). Although changes have occurred, American society remains embedded in white privilege, perpetuating a colorblind perspective and the American Dream narrative. Asian Americans, specifically, have been categorized as a "model minority", whose cultural values are perceived as superior to those of Black people (Kim, 1999). However, this perception doesn't imply a cultural assimilation into white society; on the contrary, it preserves the cultural distinctiveness that Americans often emphasize.

American whiteness is linked not only to race, but also to gender, as a masculine whiteness ideal has been constructed around the discourse of American Identity. Although American values accentuate notions of universality and inclusivity, in practice they have been quite exclusionary, with liberalism managing to perpetuate inequalities rather than eliminate them (Glenn, 2009). Feminist theorists have argued that the marginalization of women is inherent in liberal assumptions. Due to the bodily demands of pregnancy and childbirth, women are excluded from the liberal concept of American citizenship (Glenn, 2009). Nevertheless, while women represent a minority in North American societies, the intersection of race and gender further complicates this reality, and their exclusion remains a central theme in American citizenship.

2.3 Key Socio-Cultural Spheres under Migration

Long-term migration plays a key role in shaping and deepening conflicts that may arise between native and host cultural identities. What emerges is a tension that affects migrants' wellbeing, who

feel torn between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to a new set of norms (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025). Decisions regarding acculturation are not only guided by personal factors, but also by broader social structures that shape the migrant's dynamic in a reality divided by an inner multiculturalism. This research identifies two main structuring dimensions (1) Gender and (2) Tensions between home and host society, which operate through domains such as labor, family, belonging, and religion. However, it is important to note that all three spheres are interconnected and tend to overlap.

2.3.1 Gender: Work and Family

The gender aspect involved within migration has been considered a major shifting factor in the process of acculturation for both men and women, as they experience different challenges ranging from the labor market to femininity and masculinity, as well as family roles (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025). While this thesis primarily engages with gender through the representations of females and males, it is crucial to acknowledge that gender is understood as socially constructed and not reducible to biological sex (Butler, 1999). The assumption of a binary gender system implicitly perpetuates that there is a mimetic relationship between gender and sex “whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it” (Butler, 1999, p.10). This is further complicated through the process of migration and translation of gender ideals and sexualities. Immigrant queer identities have been particularly important in highlighting how migration involves also a “traffic of status [...] across such boundaries” (Manalansan, 2003, p. 9).

Gender significantly shapes acculturation processes, with migrant women often facing distinct challenges linked to maintaining and shifting social roles (Berry, 1997). This is linked to women's ability in holding tighter to the traditions and values of their homeland, as producers of ideologies, and in adapting more easily to new norms (Anthias, 1998). Previous studies have shown that migrant women prefer and strive to maintain the gender status advantages resulting from migration, as they sometimes come from strongly patriarchal societies. Gender ideology represents another obstacle; while Korean migrant women try to oppose the toxic masculinity and patriarchy embedded in many Korean men, the latter tend to maintain a rigid patriarchal ideology, also as a response to job and self-insecurity in the adaptation process. (Kim, 2006; Seo et al., 2020). Korean society has been deeply impacted by Confucianism ideology, which pushes for a submissive role for women as caretaker of the household and children's education (Kim, 2006). Despite attempts to break out of this rigid framework, the reality for women is far more complex as it requires a constant effort in finding a balance between being a Korean woman with specific expectations, being a wife and mother, and

being an immigrant at the same time (Seo et al., 2020). Gender not only shapes individual identities, but also structure key domains of everyday life, particularly within the labor and the family sphere.

Labor

Gender inequalities persist in the labor market following migration resulting in uneven achievements between women and men. Women are often left in the position of having to choose between fully committing to work or trying to find a balance between family and work life (Kim, 2006). Upon arriving in a new country, women and men tend to follow different work trajectories, as traditional gender roles and societal expectations influence the type of jobs available to women (Anastasiadou et al., 2024). Migrant women often experience lower wages and limited employment opportunities compared to both local women and migrant men, particularly evident in rural areas.

For Korean immigrants in North America the situation is not so distant. Korean migrant women show lower labor force participation compared to men, with rates of 52% and 70% respectively in the United States (Seo et al., 2020). Park (2008) suggests that the Korean perception between white-collar and blue-collar jobs, in addition to gender expectations, might be an influential factor. While white-collar jobs are a sign of prestige and education in Korea, blue-collar jobs are seen as a job to be ashamed of. Moreover, the challenge in successfully transferring human capital to the host society further complicates this, specifically for Korean migrant women who can then only access a blue-collar jobs (Omori, 2016; Park, 2008). This reality is further complicated by gender expectations and roles within the family dynamics.

Family

Family dynamics are central to understanding identity negotiation under migration, as they can reveal more about how individuals shape their identity within a context that resembles their native culture. Berry (1997) argues that age is another variable in the process of acculturation, and the difference is most evident between generations apart. Yoon (2006) understands that “generation shape one’s conception of identity and value orientation” (p. 89). First generation migrations tend to maintain stronger ties to their cultural origins, while later generations show greater alignment with the host society (Yoon, 2006). A research conducted in Australia on South Korean migrants has shown that first generations tend to adopt integration as their acculturation strategy, while second generations lean more toward assimilation (Jee, 2025).

Parental roles add a further dimension to the family context. In Korean society, women’s role is centered around the ‘Wise Mother and Good Wife’ (WMGW) mentality, which places responsibility for childcare and educational success primarily on women (Park, 2008; Seo et al., 2020).

This is the mindset that many Korean migrant mothers bring with them when moving abroad, not expecting the demands that migration would entail, having sometimes to rely on the help of other relatives (Park, 2008). Korean mothers try to project into their children's education their pursuit for empowerment as immigrants and mothers, and at the same time their 'American dream' of better opportunities (Park, 2008).

Fatherhood is also shaped under migration, creating different outcomes in the role. Confucianism has also contributed to defining what a good father should do, relegating caregiving to mothers while fathers didn't participate in the children's upbringing as it was considered not masculine by cultural norms (Kwon & Chuang, 2012). Studies on Korean immigrant fathers in Canada suggest that migration can encourage more flexible paternal roles and greater participation in childcare compared to traditional Confucian expectations (Kwon & Chuang, 2012). Others admitted to adhering more to Canadian values of fatherhood than those of Korea, showing a tendency to distance from traditional paternal roles.

The interaction with the host society creates a rupture in the structure and roles within the household, specifically in relation to parenting (Parrillo, 1991). Western parenting is typically described as authoritative, emphasizing independence, individualism, and emotional expression. In contrast, traditional Asian families follow collectivism, emotional self-control and a sense of obligation to the family as set of principles (Choi et al., 2013). Physical expressions of affection are less common, often preferring to use indirect forms such as cooking their child's favorite dish. Additionally, among traditional Korean parenting involves the use of corporal punishment. However, since Western societies view these practices negatively, Korean immigrant parents have decreased their use (Choi et al., 2013).

Lastly, another area that falls within the broader issue of gender and presents challenges in the context of migration is the development of intimate relationships. The process of globalization and modernity changes people's lifestyles and structures, and this is also reflected in the intimate affection sphere (Choe, 2021). While most families remain intact, findings have demonstrated an increase in divorce rates for Korean migrants after moving to North America (Kim, 2006). This may reflect a decision to abandon patriarchal norms and traditions and push Korean women to desire a more American-style relationship (Choe, 2021).

2.3.2 Tensions between Home and Host Societies: Belonging and Religion

Outside migrant communities, home is where cultural values and norms are closest to the country of origin, where memory is preserved, creating a reality distant from external society (Lee & Kim, 2021). Although preserving native culture within the family is essential for migrants to understand their

identity, it has consequences related to adaptation, as the gap between the migrant's performance in their home and the host society becomes too wide. This is particularly true for Korean immigrant children living in a tense family environment. For instance, second generation Korean migrants embody the role of intermediaries between home and host country for their parents, who often don't speak the language well (Lee & Kim, 2021). They often must navigate conflicting expectations between their native and external society, a task made more difficult by their role as keepers of their homeland's memories (Lee & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, variables like race represent a big obstacle for Asian Americans and their cultural identity formation (Anthias, 1998). Whether in their homeland and host country, race can distinguish them as mere strangers in both contexts, as too Western for Korea or too Asian for America (Ahmad et al., 2022). In navigating between the two worlds, younger people often face conflicts and struggle to find a sense of belonging between them.

Belonging

To belong somewhere is a fundamental element of one's own identity, and where to find this sense of belonging is what can contribute to issues related to cultural identity and a feeling of in-betweenness, where one is caught in-between two worlds, neither one nor the other. In an interview conducted by Yoon (2022) about Korean Canadians experiences, participants highlighted the difficulties in fitting in the host society. Either they were constantly reminded to be different (skin color, appearance, or food consumption) because they continued to embrace their native culture, or they assimilated too much into the country of destination, resulting in tension between cultural atmospheres of home and outside.

Another study conducted by Kim (2021) among Kowis (Koreans living in New Zealand) reported that ambiguity in belongingness is also present between migrant generations depending on their level of acculturation, while they are identified as 'just Koreans' by non-Koreans and locals. Furthermore, the question 'Where are you from?' is regarded as very complex for Kowis to answer, as both and neither seem to be true for them. Nonetheless this in-betweenness represents also a powerful asset for migrants' development, as they acquire skills from a very early age that can be useful in their future lives, from bilingual skills to adaptability (Bartley & Spoonley, 2008).

Religion

Religion also plays an important role in shaping migrants' experiences of belonging and identity negotiation. Levitt (2007) argues that religious functioning institutions act as a connection to migrants' communities of origin, operating transnationally across borders. In the context of Korean migration, churches in particular have been identified as key community spaces that serve as social functions and status (Min, 1992). As the Korean migrant population has increased, so has the number

of Korean churches. Their role mainly revolves around maintaining a connection with Korea by preserving Korean culture in several ways. For instance, they offer language and cultural education to second generation children. Moreover, through sermons, they mostly reinforce Korean values, thereby contributing to the maintenance of a collective Korean cultural identity (Min, 1992). Religious institutions therefore function not only as sites of cultural preservation but also as spaces where identity is negotiated across generations, mediating experiences of belonging.

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: NARRATIVE IDENTITY

The conceptualization of identity has brought light to its productive and fluid nature, emerging from social settings where individuals play an active role in its formation (Woodruffe-Burton & Elliott, 2005). This negotiation requires constant shaping and construction through available materials, thanks to which a person can create a coherent narrative of self-identity. The concept of narrative identity emerged in the social science around the 80s, due to a growing trend in social psychology (McAdams, 2011). The theory suggests that we are able to make sense of ourselves and our lives by telling stories, providing the individual with some resemblance of meaning (McAdams, 2011; Woodruffe-Burton & Elliott, 2005), or as Barua and Maheshwari (2025) state, it is “how interactions and personal stories influence the development of identity” (p.4).

In addition to providing individuals with the opportunity to better know themselves and construct their self, it also provides a broader knowledge about social and collective construction of reality, because narrative enables people to situate themselves in time and space (Woodruffe-Burton & Elliott, 2005). An individual has the freedom to create any variety of possible selves, yet the way they can make sense of themselves derives directly from socio-cultural context and social experiences (Woodruffe-Burton & Elliott, 2005). Therefore, different types of narrative opportunities and developments are linked to aspects of gender, race and even class division. (McAdams, 2011).

Like identity itself, narrative identity is something that can't be fixed to a person but is constantly shaped as people continue to make sense of themselves and others through storytelling (McAdams, 2011). Consequently, personal experiences such as migration represent another variable for producing self-narratives. Migrants often reflect on their migration journey and incorporate it into a personal narrative that help them explain who they are (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025). These narratives are crucial in giving meaning to their experiences and projecting stories into the external world for validation (McLean, 2008). Moreover, previous studies show that narratives can differ across cultures and the available tools to fabricate stories (McLean, 2008). Migration, therefore, represents an interesting context through which understand the narratives that are created by individuals to make sense of and validate their cultural identity, just as, conversely, a person's identity can partly reflect the types of stories that prevail in their culture (McAdams, 1996).

3.1 Visual Narratives and Identity Representation

Visual discourse contains the same properties as narrative. People can convey meanings also through performance and images, making both of them relevant in the identification process (Andreeva & Eldarion, 2022). When they lack the words to express their experiences, people can resort to visuality, as the meaning it conveys will not change, because it is people who give meaning and importance to

the narrative process (Andreeva & Eldarion, 2022). Since narrative is one of the most effective forms used by humans to elaborate experiences, it is important to understand also its visual aspect (De Fina, 2003). Visual discourse practices are not always used to express something, they can simply inform or in other cases validate an individual's existence in the world (Andreeva & Eldarion, 2022).

Since it has been shown that identity is also shaped by aesthetic and visual representations, cinema corresponds to one of the most useful manifestations, and its discursive structure differs under migration (Al-Yasri, 2021). Films serve as a platform for migrants to re-establish themselves as autonomous beings in the face of discrimination and restrictive societies (Kim, 2017). They can secure their position and their right to self-representation, distancing themselves to the often-wrong mainstream depictions of them. Mainstream cinema contributes to the on-going discourse surrounding the issue of migration and representations, but it often creates additional issues. While some films conform to general misconceptions around migrants, others try to use films to represent complex emotions of migrants, experiences and relationship with their home, communities and workplaces (Kim, 2017). Despite the fragmented and incomplete nature of migrant cinema, self-representations correspond to a survival strategy to assert their cultural rights in the mainstream discourse.

Following the upward curve of migrant cinema, South Korea has also followed suit. While films often focus on migrants' experience in the country, self-expression in movies is still much underdeveloped, and despite the emergence of films made and written by migrants, these are still in a position of clear inferiority (Kim, 2017). Since social and cultural contexts are the mechanism underlying how people believe they are and how they perform (Oh, 2018), migration offers another lens through which to understand how South Koreans see and perform their cultural identity.

3.2 Application of the Framework

Through Narrative Identity Theory, this study emphasizes the role of storytelling and visual representation in shaping how migrants understand and articulate their identities. In the context of films, narrative is not only conveyed through dialogue and plot, but also through visual elements. As illustrated in Figure 1, the construction of the self can be understood through the dichotomy 'I am real' and 'I am visual' (Andreeva & Eldarion, 2022). While performance reflects a lived identity, the visual self is closer to an ideal self, an aspiration or projection of the self. Nonetheless, the interplay between these two dimensions enables a more comprehensive understanding of identity as both experienced and constructed.

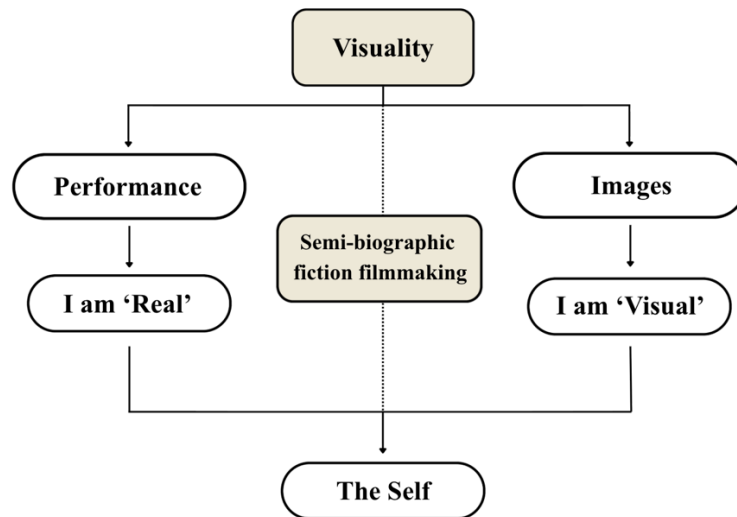


Figure 1. Visualization of the Self

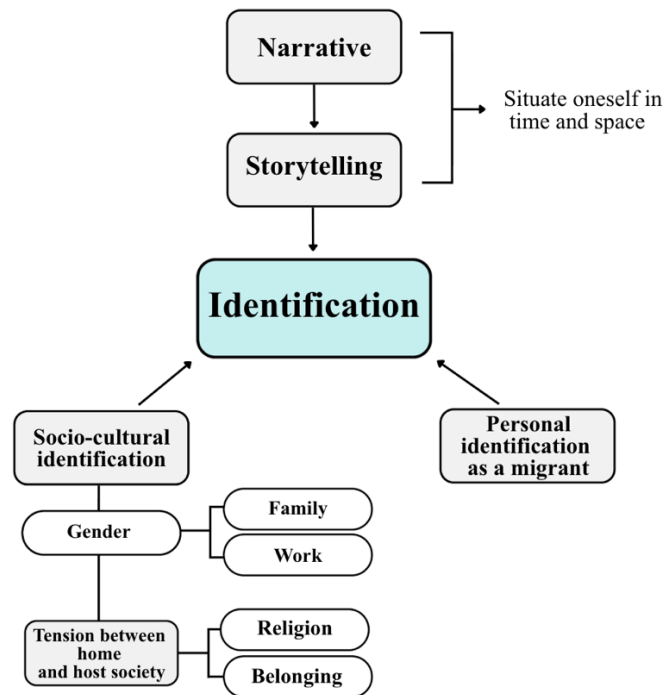


Figure 2. Visualization of Identification

Figure 2 illustrates the analytical framework guiding this study. Building on Narrative Identity Theory, the framework conceptualizes identity formation as a process emerging through narrative and visual storytelling, which allows individuals to situate themselves across time and space. Here, identification is understood as a dynamic interaction between personal experiences and broader socio-cultural structures. On the one hand, personal identification as a migrant reflects individual migration trajectories and experiences. Conversely, socio-cultural identification is shaped by key spheres identified in the literature review, including gender, family, work, tensions between home and host society, religion and belonging. These dimensions serve as analytical categories guiding the coding

and interpretation of both narrative and visual elements in the selected films, enabling a structured examination of how cultural identity is negotiated under migration.

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins by introducing the two main analysis that form the basis of this qualitative and interpretative research, which are narrative and film analyses. It then explains the criterion used to select the data, which elements are taken into consideration and what film have been chosen. Lastly, the chapter concludes with some ethical considerations and limitations.

4.1 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is used in this study to examine how migration and cultural identity are constructed through storytelling in the selected films. The focus shifts to the ‘how’, the construction of narratives and the role they play in the formation of identity, rather than just the ‘what’ (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). In this sense, the analysis pays particular attention to the ways in which characters narrate and articulate their experiences of migration, identity, and belonging, as well as how these are shaped by the broader social and cultural context in which the narrative unfolds.

By applying narrative analysis to film, the study treats cinematic storytelling as a form of narrative construction through which identities are expressed. The analysis focuses on key narrative elements such as character development, how events are framed and moments of conflict or transformation. Particular attention is given to how migration experiences are narrated, and what do they reveal about broader social and cultural implications related to identity.

This approach is particularly well suited to migration research, as it foregrounds individual action while remaining sensitive to the specific narrative choices through which meaning is produced. To ensure analytical transparency, the study follows a systematic coding process, identifying recurring themes across the films.

4.2 Film Analysis

To better understand the narrative portrayed in films, it is also crucial to better grasp the other details that constitute the very core of the film itself. Directors can use different devices, procedures, techniques of filmmaking to both construct stories and make meaning (Ryan & Lenos, 2020). The composition of images corresponds to another tool that can be useful for filmmakers to communicate ideas and tell a story that can resonate with the audience. In this study, film analysis is employed to examine how narrative meanings are reinforced, complicated or challenged through visual elements. Attention is paid to aspects such as framing, moods that can be sensed but not articulated in languages, seeable but not sayable messages, as these elements contribute to the construction of the emotional tone and character subjectivity. Rather than treating these techniques as purely aesthetic choices, the

analysis considers how they participate in the representation of migratory experiences and the negotiation of cultural identity, therefore contextualization is a crucial tool in this research.

Firstly, the analysis will focus on the plot, settings, and characters narrated in the films, bringing therefore a contextual grounding analysis from which to understand their meanings. Elements such as where the character are located and their evolution through the duration of film are important aspect to consider to better grasp the evolution of their cultural identity. Furthermore, the analysis looks at how are the characters established through the film narrative at the beginning and the end of the film and what does this reveal about Korean cultural identity. Additionally, the visual constructions implemented in the film are analyzed and how they rearticulate, or complete narrative tools related to the development of cultural identity under migration.

4.3 Data Collection and Selection

Although South Korean films have begun to gain widespread recognition and popularity among Western countries, they still represent a niche cinematic category. The Korean Wave has helped draw attention to Korean filmmaking industry, where movies such as *Parasite* (2019) and its immense success have opened new doors to Korean filmmakers. Migrant cinema has emerged in South Korea around the late 1990s and early 2000s, more as a documentary genre (Kim, 2017). Filmmakers often collaborated with migrant support organizations or media activists to bring to the big screen depiction of the reality of migrant workers. For instance, *Barricade* (1997) was the first feature film to focus on Bangladesh workers in a washing factory in South Korea (Kim, 2017, p. 62).

The focus on migration has slowly shifted toward more intimate and personal narratives, particularly in the last decade. Some films have focused on South Korean migrants returning to their home country, such as *Seoul Searching* (2015) and *Return to Seoul* (2022), while others have focused on the experience in foreign countries. The films I have selected for this research are all three focusing on South Koreans migrants in North America: *Minari* (2020), *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), and *Past Lives* (2023). For the selection criteria I focused on movies made by and about migrants, to ensure that the depiction was as close as possible to the reality of migrants' journey. All three directors are South Korean migrants raised in North America; therefore, the films are semi-biographical and inspired from their real-life journeys. The setting of the films is contemporary, allowing a more current analysis and a better understanding of how Korean migrants have been dealing with the formation of their identity in the last decades. Lastly, to include the gender aspect of the main social spheres related to identity construction under migration, all films have a main female character in the storyline, enabling the research to pay better attention to this element.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

No ethical considerations were identified in conducting this research. Despite the study focuses on humans' development under migration, no real human subjects are included. Nonetheless, the use of movies made by migrants guarantees less distortion in the narrative construction of cultural identity for South Korean migrants. It should also be noted that the films are semi-biographical, which if on one hand guarantees a more intimate and truthful representation of South Korean migrant, on the other hand, it may be subjected to biases emerging from the directors' experiences. Lastly, it is important to note that the results from this study also stem from a specific theoretical framework chosen by me, so a different framework could produce different analyses.

Finally, another note on my positionality as a researcher. I acknowledge the presence of biases in my approach, both because I'm not Korean and have not experienced migration on the first-hand. However, as the daughter of a migrant, I've observed some aspects of it and continue to do in my daily life as a foreign student too.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Following the framework presented beforehand, the findings and analysis chapter delves deeper into the three selected films by exploring the key themes that emerged from the literature review. As gender and the tension between home and host society appeared as the broader umbrella themes, the analysis breaks these down, examining the different aspects portrayed in the films, such as working conditions, intergenerational conflict and belonging. Moreover, closer attention is paid to the acculturation processes embodied by the characters and the strategies they implement. Repetitive themes are reported in the findings; however, it is important to note that under each theme, different aspects are explored.

5.1 *Minari* (2020)

Minari is a drama film by Lee Isaac Chung, which portrays the pursuit of the American Dream for a Korean migrant family in the 1980s: Jacob and Monica, first generation immigrant parents, and their children Anne and David. After moving from California to rural Arkansas to start a Korean farm, the Yi family faces new struggles in a predominantly white environment. New family dynamics and disruptions are created as the challenges of entrepreneurship and the illusion of the American Dream emerge. The arrival of Monica's mother, Soon-ja, from South Korea brings about a change in the household where the escalation of events creates both a moment of rupture and reconciliation in the family.

5.1.1 The American Dream: from Work to Living Conditions

The concept of the American dream plays a central role in shaping the Yi family's migration experience, particularly through Jacob's character, who personifies a stereotypical immigrant trying to reconcile his American dream with his Korean culture (Fauziyah et al., 2024). For him, the land in Arkansas symbolizes both autonomy and opportunity, having worked tirelessly in the chicken sexing industry in California. As an entrepreneur, Jacob's vision of success is not a mere replication of an American model, but rather an attempt to conciliate his aspirations with his Korean cultural heritage. He refuses to pay for services that he can perform himself, and stubbornly keeps exploiting what America offers him, without considering how alien the American culture is to a foreigner like him (Fauziyah et al., 2024, p. 46). In this sense, Jacob's approach to farming reflects a broader process of identity negotiation, in which he seeks to assert his independence while drawing on his cultural heritage.

This tension is further highlighted through his interactions with Paul, Jacob's co-worker on the farm, whose character embodies a more traditional representation of American identity, characterized by hard-work and Christian faith. Their different approaches to farming, particularly

when Paul suggests to Jacob that he should “go the Arkansas way” (00:33:16), illustrate a clash between cultural frameworks. Jacob’s dismissal of this advice suggests both resistance to assimilation and a desire to maintain control over his own path towards success.

The film also portrays contrasting interpretations of the American dream through Monica’s character, whose priorities center on stability and the well-being of the children. Unlike Jacob, Monica values the predictability of city life and is willing to work in the chicken sexing industry to guarantee stability for her family, reflecting a Korean perspective. On the other hand, Jacob, given the chance, wants to improve his financial situation by shouldering the burden of responsibility alone, which leads him to gradually distance himself from his family. Visually, these tensions are reinforced through the spatial separation between Jacob and Monica. While the former is often positioned in the fields, the latter remains closer to the home and the children (Figure 3). Jacob’s increasing dedication to the farm ultimately leads to emotional distance, especially towards the end, during Monica’s confrontation:

Monica: You chose the farm over our family. [...] I’ve lost my faith in you. I can’t do this anymore. (Minari, 2020, 01:39:44-01:40:59)



Figure 3. *Minari* (2020), sc. 00:02:24

Lastly, the film highlights the paradox and illusion of the American dream: the possibility for upward social mobility and better economic opportunities through migration is offset by instability, isolation and structural limitations. Jacob and Monica work in a migrant-dominated workspace and live in a mobile home in rural Arkansas, often facing difficulties such as water shortages. Jacob’s conviction that, despite all this, their life in America is far better than in South Korea reflects the deceptive narrative surrounding the American dream. In this sense, his acculturation process and

identity formation are also shaped by the contradictions embedded in the pursuit of the American dream.

5.1.2 Family and Gender Norms

Through Monica and Jacob's relationship, the film explores the burden of migration for marriage and how cultural gender norms evolve. Following the American dream theme, both characters struggle to assimilate while simultaneously meeting Korean gender expectations. From the very first sequences, Monica depicts the typical character of an Asian woman, as she places her children and family at the top of her priorities and is openly disappointed by her husband's decision (Tran-Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). However, her gender expectations are further complicated by her acculturation process, as Monica also engages with American ideals. For instance, she views work as necessary for the family's financial stability yet still expects Jacob to be the provider. She is constantly worried about their financial situation and feels that, in doing so, she has neglected her own children. She blames herself for her mother's illness and apologizes to her daughter Anne for putting so much pressure on the children, promising to "not let this happen again" (01:24:31).

Throughout the film, Monica's commitment to the family transpires in the constant sacrifice of her own desires. She puts everyone else's needs before her own, accepts her mother's help and money, and accepts Jacob's dream if it means he can provide for the children. Only at the end does Monica put herself first and threatens to leave Jacob, choosing to move on. However, after the fire destroys much of the farm's harvest, she stays with the family and joins Jacob's farming dream. Her character highlights the ambivalence and difficulties of acculturation in attempting to adapt to a new setting, seeking to challenge the gender order while simultaneously meeting gender expectations.

Jacob's character is also impacted by the acculturation process and the American dream, particularly regarding his role as a father. His dream requires a more individualistic approach that contradicts what is expected of him within his Korean migrant family. While his intentions reflect the need to succeed and provide for his family, he is slowly abandoning the family oriented values that form the backbone of Korean families (Tran-Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021, p. 4). He is under pressure from the family obligations he has as a father and as the eldest son of his family back in Korea:

Jacob: I'm the eldest son. I had to take care of my family. I'm done now. They're all doing well!

Monica: Who's doing well? My mother? Us? Which family are you even talking about? (Minari, 2020, 00:13:02-00:13:11)

Everything about Jacob reflects his past efforts, which appear not to have been enough to bring his family in a better situation, given that they still live in a tiny house with no money (Fauziyah et al., 2024). He wants to be a role model for his children and rejects the idea of abandoning his project even as financial problems start to affect the family dynamics. Every decision involves some sort of sacrifice for Jacob, both for his family and for his dream. Therefore, his struggle reflects a self in crisis, torn between what America can offer him and what his family needs.

Jacob: They need to see me succeed at something for once. [...] Even if I fail, I have to finish what I started. (Minari, 2020, 01:35:00-01:35:38)

5.1.3 Three-Generation Conflict

Soon-ja's arrival in the house brings new changes in the family, most specifically her strongly Korean personality collides with David's assimilated one. Having lived his whole life in the U.S., David is foreign to Korean culture and his relationship with his grandmother Soon-ja represents his first approach to Korea, outside of his parents (Fauziyah et al., 2024). That's also portrayed through his perspective, for instance, when the camera reveals that he is looking both curiously and hesitantly to his mother and grandmother (Figures 4 & 5).



Figure 4. *Minari* (2020), sc. 00:29:05



Figure 5. *Minari* (2020), sc. 00:29:51

Soon-ja embodies everything unfamiliar to David regarding Korean culture and values, and she counterbalances what David perceives as the appropriate way of being for a grandmother, embedded in American ideologies. He refuses to share his bedroom with her because he senses a Korea smell even though he has never been there, showing disgust and reluctance in sharing the space with her. Moreover, David keeps telling the other family members that he believes Soon-ja isn't a real grandmother, she's unlike the other American grandmother he usually sees. Grandmothers are supposed to "bake cookies, don't swear, and don't wear men's underwear" (00:50:02-00:50:07) according to him. Other than the acculturation differences, age plays an important role in defining their relationship. David and Soon-ja have difficulties in connecting and understanding each other but most of all they have different reactions and strategies to adapt to the American context.

Nonetheless, David slowly starts to accept Soon-ja in his space, and as their connection deepens, David's cultural identity starts to shift as well. He mimics her gestures and way of saying, both with his family and his friend, and spends more time with her. In a context in which his family is also going through an acculturation process, Soon-ja represents connection to Korea and exposure to Korean cultures and values hidden until then. While their conflictual relationship had emerged because of the different levels of acculturation, Soon-ja manages to break through the American dream filter and bring Korea in the household, reminding everyone of home.

Soon-ja's role in mirroring home and therefore creating conflict is not only reflected between her and David, but also between her and Monica. In the latter's case, this dynamic is not guided by different levels of acculturation but rather to a feeling of belongingness and homesickness. Upon receiving goods from Korea, Monica is overwhelmed but also comforted by the security that her mother is offering her. Soon-ja senses a lost connection that the family is experiencing with Korea, underlying how "They come to America and forget everything" (00:41:13). This implies a constant

intergenerational pain of forgetting and remembering (Ion, 2021), a conflict that it isn't only between people but also between values, expectations and memories getting replaced.

5.1.4 Cultural Assimilation: Alienation and Tensions

Different levels of cultural assimilation portrayed within the characters reflect their strategy in the U.S. context. All the family's characters, except for the grandmother, have English names and consume both Korean and American products. A symbolic item of assimilation is the beverage Mountain Dew, but the family's incorrect understanding of the drink shows their limited understanding of U.S. norms. On the other hand, the children refusal to drink Korean herbal medicine reflects distance from Korea, indicating their level of assimilation.

Moreover, the character's reluctance or openness to assimilation partly stems from their language skills. The children mainly talk in English between each other and Jacob converses with other farmers and sometimes with the kids in English. Monica, however, doesn't have confidence in her language skills, and her inability to connect with the locals is part of why the family remains isolated. The predominantly white environment plays a role in this as well. The community in which they are living doesn't reflect their Asian identity, making them more aware of their dual cultural identity. While they try integrating American ideals and lifestyles, for instance, the use of corporal punishments is still implemented, particularly with David. Therefore, despite the external environment forces the family to assimilate, the home environment allows them to keep ties with their native cultural aspects.

Another important key factor is the role of the church in the Korean cultural structure. The church represents a middle ground space between the Yi family and the outside world in the film (Fauziyah et al., 2024), as most of the interactions that they have with locals happen through the church environment. The use of the church is also necessary to make the Yi family visibly stand out in the white environment (Figure 6), as they are the only Asian people present there (Zalipour, 2022). Their isolation is further complicated by the difficulties that Monica has trying to connect with other immigrants in the workplace. Differences emerge regarding how they view the Korean church, suggesting that despite a shared language and culture, ethnics workplaces are still subjected to conflicts and tensions.



Figure 6. *Minari* (2020), sc. 00:46:16

Lastly, the Minari plant brought and planted by Soon-ja symbolizes the presence of Korea and the process of setting in a foreign country (Fauziyah et al., 2024). Soon-ja perceives the family as Americanized, positioning and defining their cultural identity. Therefore, she tries to nurture the roots of the children's cultural identity, just as the Minari plant does, by bringing Korea with her, from the food to the rupture she creates in their acculturation process. As the Minari plant grows, also the roots that the family is planting in Arkansas are, and at the end when Monica finally joins Jacob in his farming project, the Minari creek is fully flourished. The film reminds the importance of being open to planting roots and learn how to thrive in new circumstances, like how the Minari plant thrives in new places.

5.1.5 Conclusion

Minari focuses on the family environment and its relation to the U.S. setting. As a result, the family sphere appears to be unstable, where dynamics emerging are a direct consequence of the acculturation process that each character is undergoing. Their cultural identities are ambiguous, not fully defined and at different stages. The children demonstrate more assimilation-leaning characteristics, compared to the parents who are still holding on their native culture, positioning them in the integration realm. The link to the Korean culture is portrayed with gender norms and expectations, particularly in the parenthood of Jacob and Monica. The latter is the closer among the two to a Korean cultural identity, as women tend to hold on tighter to native costumes and traditions. Soon-ja assimilation is not really assessed, however, given her old age she will likely never assimilate. Lastly, the shifts that occur in their cultural identities emerge through the interaction with others, whether within or outside the family.

5.2 *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022)

Riceboy Sleeps by Anthony Shim is a coming-of-age drama film set in the 1990s that follows the story of So-Young, a Korean single mother migrant, and her son Dong-Hyun as they settle down and live in Canada. The film explores the struggle of holding to the native cultural identity while also adapting to a more “Canadian” lifestyle (Tu, 2023). Through their mother-son relationship and the evolution of boyhood, their acculturation process is either complicated or contested, particularly when a tragic news forces both characters to face their relationship and belongingness. The story depicts an intimate side of many migrants’ reality, focusing on the mother-son journey searching for a home and roots, highlighting how sometimes home isn’t a physical place (Tu, 2023).

5.2.1 Cultural Assimilation: Racism and Pressure

The film investigates the cultural assimilation process of So-Young and Dong-Hyun through two main sites: workplace and school. Upon moving to Canada, mother and son face different obstacles that reflect racist tropes and pressures enforced by the host society (Xu, 2022). For So-Young, racism is experienced within the workplace often intersecting gender discriminations. For instance, she is sexually harassed by a co-worker who doesn’t take her seriously when she tries to stand up for herself, due to her difficulties in speaking English. On the other hand, Dong-Hyun’s school setting is where the difficulties with integration are reinforced. Just in his first day of school, Dong-Hyun is mocked for his lunchbox, he is called “riceboy” and pressured to adopt an English name. His decision to adopt the name David results from knowing that he will always be perceived as a foreigner and that it will be more beneficial to the host society rather than him (Pleines, 2023; Tu, 2023). Therefore, his cultural identity is embedded in the desire to be recognized as non-foreigner. The pressure to adhere to a new set of norms is emphasized later when So-Young and her fellow migrant co-workers are trying to help one of them choose her son’s English name, highlighting also the homogenization of ethnic immigrant communities (Xu, 2022).

Furthermore, cultural assimilation is processed differently between So-Young and Dong-Hyun due to their age differences and setting in which they navigate. So-Young works in a predominantly ethnic factory; she interacts and meets fellow Korean migrants and tries to keep the Korean heritage alive in the house by cooking traditional food and speaking mainly Korean. On the other side, Dong-Hyun’s school environment is predominantly white, he experiences cultural pressure in assimilating and shapes himself to become “white”, both in his looks and manners. After being mocked for his lunchbox, Dong-Hyun throws the food in the bin and later in the evening asks So-Young to pack him something different for the next lunch, to which So-Young hesitantly agrees to. This represents a first rejection from Dong-Hyun to Korean culture, later emphasized when he is a

teenager. For instance, he tells So-Young that her Korean breakfast “tastes like shit” (01:00:07). Their reaction to racist and pressuring experiences is what distinguishes their strategies adopted in the acculturation process.

Their different evolution in the assimilation process is also portrayed visually. During their first steps in interacting with the host society, both Dong-Hyun and So-Young are portrayed in isolation, more interestingly when they are having lunch at school and at work respectively (Figures 8 & 9).



Figure 7. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 00:05:26



Figure 8. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 00:05:50

This is later counterbalanced by scenes after the time jump, when Dong-Hyun is now a teenager, and they have been living in Canada for more than a decade. The trajectories of their integration within the host society have diverged quite a bit. Even though they are both portrayed in a group context, the difference lies in their positions and environment. Dong-Hyun is placed centrally and he's the only non-white boy among his friends (Figure 10). On the other hand, So-Young is having lunch with other migrant workers and is positioned immersed in the context (Figure 11).

Dong-Hyun is trying to fit in with his peers, however, he still stands out in the group as the migrant boy, while So-Young's reality reflects more a community-based approach in navigating the host society.



Figure 9. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 00:28:17



Figure 10. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 00:33:13

Lastly, the film uses the metaphor of the evolving body as “an indication of adapting to a dominant culture” (Park, 2025, p. 152). This evolution is linked to Dong-Hyun's character and the changes in his looks, as he tries to visually shape himself to belong to white Canadian society. Since hair is a versatile part of the body that can be artificially changed, Dong-Hyun's looks offer a glimpse into the subject's attitudes towards society (Park, 2025). As a child, Dong-Hyun portrays the stereotypical Korean boy with a bowl haircut and glasses. After being called “riceboy” by his classmates he is made aware of how different he looks, he hasn't assimilated the western culture yet, but he starts to wonder whether his looks are okay or not (Figure 12). After the time jump, Dong-Hyun has dyed his hair blonde; he wears colored contact lenses and wears a more Western type of attire (Figure 13). His facial expression is emotionless, suggesting that this morning ritual is ordinary (Park, 2025). Finally, while traveling in Korea, Dong-Hyun decides to shave his hair off completely,

mirroring also the typical young adult Korean male in the military service, which represent an important turning event in young Koreans (Park, 2025, p.168). He looks himself in the mirror smiling gently, almost suggesting a proud feeling about his looks (Figure 14). Through these three important moments, the film explores the evolution of Dong-Hyun's cultural identity shifts, from doubt to rejection and finally acceptance.



Figure 11. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 00:18:28



Figure 12. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 00:27:34



Figure 13. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 01:42:26

5.2.2 Mother-Son Conflict

As Dong-Hyun grows up and continues to resist his Korean cultural identity, the rift between mother and son widens, leading to an intergenerational conflict (Xu, 2022). In the first act, the film displays a tighter bond between So-Young and Dong-Hyun, they are depicted cooking together or reading bedtime stories in Korean. However, as the struggles from migration start to emerge discrepancies in their view and approach also arise. Asian families tend to emphasize interdependence, respect for elders, sense of obligation and emotional self-control (Choi et al., 2013), qualities that are also reflected in So-Young's motherhood. She often reminds Dong-Hyun that a man is not supposed to cry and that he should defend himself, even physically. The values that So-Young teaches Dong-Hyun, however, contrast those of Western cultures. This is further developed through the lack of Korean exposure for Dong-Hyun compared to So-Young, as he lacks a migrant community, unlike his mother. He navigates the host society without a reference to build his Asian masculinity, further aggravated by the absent father figure in his life (Park, 2025).

The different levels of assimilation result in continuous conflicts in the household, especially as Dong-Hyun transitions into teenagerhood. He mainly speaks in English, rarely code-switching, and has grown rather avoidant. On the other hand, So-Young still tries to repair the bond between them, for instance by preparing breakfast for him. However, when his stubbornness and rejection of Korean identity emerge in their conversations, So-Young's frustration becomes clear, reflecting a growing distance from her son.

So-Young: Why is it that every time I try and speak to you about anything you just get annoyed and angry? I'm trying to have a real, serious- [...] I'm not finished talking. Sit back down. [...] You ungrateful bastard. What? After all I've done to raise you. (Riceboy Sleeps, 2022, 00:59:50-01:00:38)

Compared to the other themes, the intergenerational conflict is less verbal and more visual, spatially replicating the distance that both are experiencing between each other. For instance, after a heated discussion, So-Young and Dong-Hyun are framed on two different levels, the former on top of the staircase and the latter at the bottom (Figures 15 & 16), visually reflecting their emotional distance as well as their contrasting cultural identities.



Figure 14. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 01:01:24



Figure 15. *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), sc. 01:01:49

The trip to Korea, after So-Young's revelation about her illness, represents a moment of reconciliation between mother and son. Through the discovery and connection to his Korean cultural identity, Dong-Hyun opens about a part of himself that had been kept hidden. He can find masculine representations to look up to and ultimately navigate his own masculinity. This coming-of-age turning point is not only fundamental for himself, but also for his bond with So-Young. The closer Dong-Hyun is with Korea, the closer he gets with his mother, and even visually they are framed closer, ending with a tearful hug.

5.2.3 Belonging and Searching for Roots

The theme of belonging is a subtler but continuously present aspect of the movie, impacting both So-Young and Dong-Hyun's sense of alienation. A school assignment about family heritage feeds Dong-Hyun's interest in his roots, more specifically in his deceased father whom he never met. So-Young remains dismissive of her former partner, often shifting the conversation by avoiding the topic directly. This is a result of the social rejection that emerged after her partner's suicide and the social implications that have risen from it. For instance, the partner's family isolation and the impossibility to obtain citizenship for Dong-Hyun, as he was born out of wedlock, are aspects of the social structure that impacted So-Young's life trajectory and belongingness.

Nonetheless, Dong-Hyun remains determined to understand this side of himself and pressures So-Young in opening about his dad. One of the reasons behind his attitude is due to the lack of belongingness in Canada. While So-Young has been able to surround herself with a migrant community, by sharing food, experiences and guidance, Dong-Hyun has felt alone in the school environment, struggling to fit in.

Dong-Hyun's discovery of his hidden Korean cultural identity and his roots emerges through the trip to Korea, when he finally meets his father's family. Through the bond with his uncle and grandfather, he manages to learn drinking costumes, sharing meals, and the farming origins of his family. So-Young's illness served as a catalyst for both to put their differences aside and reconnect with each other and with Korea. Dong-Hyun is able to learn more about his father; he is given his belongings, wears his military jacket and shaves his hair off, probably to emulate his father's looks (Park, 2025). His hair transformation not only reflects a patriotic metaphor, but also his ability to finally gain connection with his roots (Park, 2025, p. 160). With her inevitable death, So-Young guarantees Dong-Hyun a family to support him, by introducing him to a new home and kinship (Xu, 2022). Reflecting the teacher's assignment, by knowing where he comes from, he can now move forward in a direction that reflects his origins. Every remain of his "whiteness" is left behind the longer they stay in Korea. Reconnecting with their roots and home country becomes the only way for them to find a sense of belonging.

Finally, their search for roots and belonging culminates when they visit her dead partner's grave. Both So-Young and Dong-Hyun find closure by paying tribute to his dad and finally reconciling between each other. In a sorrowful moment, So-Young simply tells Dong-Hyun "Let's go home" (01:52:07), not specifying which home as their home is wherever they have each other, thus challenging the notion that home is merely a physical place.

5.2.4 Conclusion

Riceboy Sleeps manages to capture the intricate realities of rejection of identity and finding belongingness, by using the mother-son relationship to dive deeper into it. Despite the family context is crucial to the film, the sphere of tension between home and host society also emerges as fundamental to understand the changes in the characters' cultural identities. While So-Young's strategy falls within the realm of integration, Dong-Hyun follows an assimilation trajectory by growing distant both from his mother and his Korean identity, which appears unstable compared to So-Young's one. As a result, their relationship is also fractured, further complicated by the frustration caused by their difficulty in adapting to their host society, which they project onto their family life.

5.3 *Past Lives* (2023)

Past Lives' plot centers on Nora (formerly Na-Young) as she migrates from South Korea to Canada as a kid, and later from Canada to New York as an adult. The romantic drama film unfolds in the span of 24 years, following her journey as she settles down in North America, married to a white Jewish husband and later reunites with her childhood sweetheart Hae-Sung. Central themes involve intimate connections, identity and self-evolution, focusing particularly on the different "what ifs" and the swings of in-betweenness that characterize migrants' lives. Through Hae-Sung, Nora can reconnect with her native culture and the younger version of herself, awakening her dormant Korean cultural identity (Chan, 2024). On the other hand, Nora reflects American identity and values as well, which are further expressed through her American husband Arthur. The film reveals the emotional cost of migration (Santiago, 2025), as Nora finds herself facing both her identities, what she left behind and what she has gained as a migrant.

5.3.1 Displacement and Tensions

The film provides a glimpse on Nora's family's last moments before migrating, reflecting the reality of many migrants' journey, specifically the challenges that arise in preserving their cultural identity while adapting to a new context (Chan, 2024). Glimpses inside Nora's household and family interaction reveal that the decision to move abroad is dictated by the new opportunities that they could gain abroad. For instance, young Nora explains to her classmates that her reason for moving abroad is because "Koreans don't win the Nobel Prize for Literature" (00:08:16-00:08:19). The same applies to her parents that, despite being established artists in Korea, are still seeking for better possibilities abroad. During a playdate between Nora and Hae-Sung, her childhood sweetheart, Hae-Sung's mother shows difficulties in understanding their decision to leave behind all they have accomplished in Korea. In response, Nora's mother reveals that "if you leave something behind, you gain something, too" (00:06:54-00:06:57).

However, Nora's perspective on the matter changes through the years reflecting another side of migration. While living in Korea for 12 years has allowed her to form a deeper connection to the country, the film explores the aspect of grief that accompanies migrants (Chan, 2024; Santiago, 2025). When Nora moves to Canada, and later to New York, she gains new opportunities that she would probably never have had in Korea. On the other hand, she also loses something meaningful behind: a loss of identity and home that she'll never access (Santiago, 2025). As an adult, Nora is pursuing a career as a playwright in New York and uses her narrative tools to investigate and understand her experience.

Stage Actress: And all this cost me something, too. I crossed the Pacific Ocean to be here. Some crossings cost more than others. Some crossings you pay for with your whole life. (Past Lives, 2023, 00:46:23-00:46:38)

Migration offers the first layer through which understand the constant sense of displacement and tensions that characterize Nora throughout the film. She acknowledges that she won't be able to access that life anymore, her journey as a migrant is what distinguishes her from what she was before leaving Korea, but she can't help but wonder how things could have been different if she hadn't migrated. As they greet each other goodbye one last time, young Hae-Sung and Nora part their ways in two different directions, visually Nora is heading upwards compared to Hae-Sung (Figure 17). This scene could reflect the difficulties she is about to face as a migrant, making her life more complicated than the one she is leaving behind in Korea. Alternatively, it could refer to the greater opportunities she will encounter along the way, which will see her rise higher than Hae-Sung.



Figure 16. *Past Lives* (2023), sc. 00:09:57

5.3.2 Identity: In-Betweenness

The theme of identity is developed through Nora's character, and specifically her interaction with Hae-Sung and Arthur, her American husband. The film revolves around the concept of Inyeon, which refers to human connections and fate. While the superficial layer of the story might suggest a focus on love, the questions that Inyeon brings up are "as much about love as they are about identity" (Pack, 2023). Over the years, Nora's identity has changed, distancing herself from the person she was before migrating. During college, she decides to reconnect with Hae-Sung, starting a long-distance ambivalent relationship that swings between a friendship and romantic curiosity, allowing her also to reconnect with Korea and a part of herself. Through their relationship it appears evident that Hae-Sung's memories of her are linked both to who she was before leaving Korea and what she represented to him as a young boy. On the other hand, Nora emphasizes different ways how she has grown up, particularly by changing smaller but important part of herself through migration. When discussing childhood memories, Nora reveals to Hae-Sung that she doesn't cry anymore, highlighting the necessity to change her emotional rules after migration.

Hae-sung: Why don't you cry now? You can't cry in New York City?

Nora: When I first immigrated, I used to cry a lot, but then I realized that nobody cared. (Past Lives, 2023, 00:22:53-00:23:11)

The Nora of New York is not the same Nora that she was in Seoul, and particularly not the Nora that Hae-Sung remembers (Santiago, 2025). As she starts to reconnect with her Korean side, Nora also feels she is losing track of what is happening in her life in New York, therefore, prompting her to end her long-distance friendship with Hae-Sung. Nora recognizes that she can't exist with one foot in Korea and one in New York, migration has already cost her something and changed her completely (Nguyen, 2023). She doesn't want to lose the achievements she has gained despite knowing that she will lose something else behind in the process.

Nora: I immigrated twice to be here in New York. I want to accomplish something here. I want to commit to my life here, but I'm sitting around looking up flights to Seoul instead. (Past Lives, 2023, 00:32:28-00:32:58)

Through this dialogue, migrant's choices appear significant and active in guiding also their assimilation process. The compromise that Nora does, to focus on the opportunities she has in America, reflects a bigger scheme of small compromises that migrants do as they navigate the host society. Finding balance between two identities is difficult; either she embraces her new cultural identity and partially neglects her native one, or she shuts herself off within her Korean cultural

identity and neglects what the host country has to offer. The film, therefore, poses the question: what happens to the part of Nora that don't survive immigration? And how can she connect with someone who only knew her before? (Santiago, 2025).

Nora: The Na-Young you remember doesn't exist here. But that little girl did exist. She's not in front of you, but it doesn't mean she's not real. Twenty years ago, I left her behind with you. (Past Lives, 2023, 01:26:46-01:27:15)

5.3.3 Acculturation: Ambiguity

Nora's ambiguous identity negotiation is linked to her acculturation process and her gradual disconnection to Korea, a distance she only fully realizes when she meets Hae-Sung after 24 years. During their various videocalls, Nora reveals that even her mom no longer uses her Korean name, signaling a shift in her adopted identity. While changing to an English name represent the first layer of assimilation, the film unveils other struggles and limitations caused by assimilation. Nora has difficulties in typing in Korean and lacks knowledge about certain aspects of contemporary Korean life, showing a distanced perspective when talking about it (Pack, 2023). Her adopted environment in which she's been navigating since moving abroad has distanced her from her original culture (Chan, 2024). The distance becomes evident in her conversation with Hae-Sung, who explains the pressures that he has as an only son in the Korean marriage market. Nora's questions appear almost naïve, revealing a lack of understanding of Korean expectations and a gap between her lived experience and the cultural framework that he navigates. Through this interaction it becomes clear that cultural assimilation hasn't simply distanced Nora from Korea but has also reshaped her ability to relate to its social norms.

Nora: What do you mean?

Hae-Sung: I'm an only child. If you're going to marry an only son, he should make more money and be better. I'm too ordinary.

Nora: You're ordinary? (Past Lives, 2023, 00:58:00-00:58:20)

The film further reinforces this disconnection through visual means, as Nora and Hae-Sung are positioned apart during these conversations, visually reflecting the cultural distance between them (Figure 18).



Figure 17. *Past Lives* (2023), sc. 00:58:24

Hae-Sung is entangled with the country she has left behind and a culture that she doesn't relate to anymore (Nguyen, 2023). As Korea and Hae-Sung become intertwined in her imagination, her relationship with Korea remains also unresolved, as it represents a past identity that is no longer accessible to her but also not completely lost (Vineberg, 2024). This ambiguity is further articulated during a conversation that Nora has with her husband. She admits that she's struggling to understand herself, as she feels "less Korean" and, paradoxically, "more Korean" in Hae-Sung's presence, therefore unable to find a balance between her two cultural identities. This contradiction illustrates how cultural assimilation does not produce a stable identity, but rather a fragmented one. Nora's identity emerges as situational, shifting depending on the cultural context and the individuals she interacts with.

Nora: It's crazy to see him be this grown-up man who has a normal job and a normal life... he's so Korean. He still lives with his parents, which is really Korean, and he has all these really Korean views on everything, and I just feel really not-Korean with him. But also, in some way, more Korean? It's so weird. I mean I have Korean friends, but he's like, not Korean-American, you know? He's a Korean-Korean.

Arthur: Is he attractive?

Nora: I think so. He's really masculine, in this way I think is so Korean. (Past Lives, 2023, 01:05:28-01:06:22)

5.3.4 Desire: Negotiation

The film explores the theme of human connections and intimate relationships as a lens through which understand Nora's identity evolution. While the narrative is structured around a romantic relationship, Nora is not torn between two lovers but rather between two versions of herself (Santiago, 2025). In this context, Hae-Sung functions as a symbolic link to Nora's past and her Korean side, more particularly to a version of herself that was shaped before migration. Their encounter opens a series of "what if" scenarios, allowing Nora to briefly imagine the life she might have led, had she remained in Korea. This results in a simultaneous sense of attraction and rejection towards him. Nora is drawn to what Hae-Sung represents, such as familiarity and cultural continuity, but she also resists the implications of this connection, as it challenges the identity she has built in North America.

While this theme is articulated through dialogues, it is equally conveyed through subtle visual aspects, including lingering glances (Figure 19), silences, unspoken questions and a lack of physical interactions between them (Figure 20). These moments create a sense of emotional tension, desire and unresolved possibility, underlying that what connects them is not a present relationship, but a shared past and an imagined alternative life.



Figure 18. *Past Lives* (2023), sc. 01:01:35



Figure 19. *Past Lives* (2023), sc. 00:56:02

This tension is enclosed in Nora's metaphor describing her marriage: "it's like planting two trees in one pot. Our roots need to find their place" (00:59:50- 00:59:58). Their marriage is a process of finding space for each other but also of managing two different cultural identities that exist simultaneously. The image of roots evokes ideas of origin, belonging, and cultural grounding, and a reminder that Nora's identity has been shaped by experiences and environment. As a result, their identities have grown in separate contexts, making it difficult to reconcile their past connection with their present lives. The metaphor therefore illustrates not only the incompatibility of the romantic relationship between Hae-Sung and Nora, but also the broader tension between homeland identity and diasporic transformation. These dynamics are also reflected in her marriage with Arthur, whose growing insecurity reveals another dimension of Nora's identity negotiation. Despite sharing a life within the same cultural context, Arthur recognizes that there are aspects of Nora's identity inaccessible to him. Within this scenario, Nora's cultural identity is not only internally fragmented but also relationally constructed, shaped by the human connections with which she engages.

Arthur: You dream in a language that I can't understand. It's like there's this whole place inside of you where I can't go. (Past Lives, 2023, 01:14:31-01:14:58)

5.3.5 Conclusion

Past Lives investigates the constant identity negotiation of Nora as she navigates two cultures and two identities at the same time. Through visuals and emotional dialogues, the film emphasizes that there is not final stage of assimilation and fixed cultural identity that can be accomplished. While Nora is not able to preserve her native cultural identity, she manages to define her own positionality

in the matter. However, as she takes a more active role in negotiating her identity, she also encounters more ambiguity and tensions between these two parts of herself. What comes up as contested then is her ability to shape her identity outside of the context and human connections she engages with.

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the three films and their narrative and visual spheres allows to delve deeper into how identity formation and acculturation have been processed and articulated by the characters, and what are the broader implications. While the films share similarities surrounding migration and individuals' evolutions, different spheres and dynamics emerge as unstable within the cultural identity negotiation process. This section synthesizes the findings across the three films to examine how cultural identity is negotiated under migration, bringing the analysis into dialogue with existing literature.

The findings reveal that identity formation is shaped not only by migration itself, but also by class background and migration context. The pursuit of the American dream represents a shared thread between the three films; however uneven outcomes mirror a difference in the class background and opportunities for the characters. In *Past Lives* Nora and her family work in the arts, she has pursued higher education and navigates an environment that reflects this, by living in the East Village in New York. While her migration still involves challenges, she benefits from greater cultural and economic privilege. On the other hand, *Minari* and *Riceboy Sleeps* both depict working class families, as Jacob, Monica and So-Young all work in factories and are unable to achieve social uplift. Their opportunities are structurally constrained. Therefore, the films demonstrate that migration doesn't imply equal opportunity, despite the narrative surrounding the American dream. Identity can be shaped also by material conditions, as well as structural inequalities, which impact migrants' opportunities and identity trajectories.

Despite these differences, the reasoning behind their migration remains voluntary and according to Berry (1997) that would assume the possibility of choosing freely their acculturation strategy. However, the environment in which they are living, structural constraints and external forces further complicate their decisions. Migration offers the illusion of designing one's own future and identity, not considering the impact of the context in which one lives. Workplace, school or church become sites where migrants confront racism, marginalization, and pressures to assimilate. This, however, is also determined by the age and the connection with the native culture.

In the films, first generation migrants such as Monica, Jacob, So-Young and Soon-ja demonstrate a stronger tie to Korea. While they are still subjected to acculturation process, their Korean cultural identity is strong and already formed, therefore they tend to adopt integration strategies. Younger generations of migrants, however, show a blurrier and weaker connection to their Korean cultural identity. Anne, David, Dong-Hyun and Nora struggle to keep this connection alive, resulting then into ambiguity surrounding their identity. From the use of English names to rejection

of Korean cultural aspects, younger generations seek “ethnic disidentification” (Yoon, 2022, p. 37), approaching an assimilation strategy.

Previous research has underlined the relevance of external forces and of the ‘Other’ from the host society as prime influences in migrants’ identity formation. However, the films reveal that encounters with a Korean ‘Other’ can act as a catalyst in identity negotiation and acculturation process. In the films this ‘Other’ is embodied by key characters that represent Korea along with its values and traditions. In *Minari*, Soon-Ja’s role centers around connecting David to his motherland, the same goes for Dong-Hyun and his relatives in *Riceboy Sleeps*, and Hae-Sung for Nora in *Past Lives*. These encounters force them to reconsider what being Korean means, further complicating the idea that only host societies can deviate migrants’ acculturation process. The interactions with a Korean ‘Other’ represent a major awakening and turning point in their lives.

The films emphasize the relevance of the home and family environment to keep alive Korean customs and traditions. Both *Minari* and *Riceboy Sleeps* highlight the collectivistic nature of the household, where the projection of their migrant dream is also imbued. However, the neat contrast with the host society makes the home a site of unsettlement and conflict within the characters. Therefore, conflicts also arise with the family members that more reflect the Korean elements. For instance, David doesn’t consider Soon-Ja as his real grandmother, or Dong-Hyun and So-Young’s relationship has been strained because of this difference. Food also represents an important element in the household in both films and therefore, becomes a signifier of identity by reflecting an ambivalence between Western and Korean cultures (Yuh, 2002). The customs of cooking together and sharing a meal is seen as a connecting factor between the younger generations and their heritage. So-Young often cooks Dong-Hyun’s favorite foods and during their trip to Korea, Dong-Hyun’s first interaction with his family and Korean cultural identity happens through a shared meal. In *Minari*, Soon-Ja reconnects the family to their forgotten roots through the Minari plant. At the same time, food also offers a glimpse of the acculturation process. The presence of American food often demanded by the younger generations is a sign of assimilation, as they feel the weight of the dominant culture (Yuh, 2002, p. 126). David’s Mountain Dew obsession and Dong-Hyun’s request to have a non-Korean lunchbox both reflect assimilation and pressure.

In *Past Lives*, the family sphere is not explored as much as the relationships through which Nora finds connection with Korea and America. Compared to the other two films, *Past Lives* manifests an inclination to a more individualistic mindset, as Nora’s identity evolution is closer tied to America. The film deepens the idea of home as a key element in identities’ formation by looking specifically at intimate relationships, which become a site of identity building as well. The

relationship between Monica and Jacob also appears contested due to their migration journey and the rejection that both women experience towards Korean men could be provoked by a preference towards relationships that are not driven by patriarchy and strict Korean values, but more American-style ones (Kim, 2006).

On the other side, women are considered to have closer relation to their homeland, mainly as reproducers of cultural norms and values, further complicated by Korea's expectations on women (Anthias, 1998; Seo et al., 2020). Monica, So-Young, and Soon-Ja are the keepers of Korean cultural traditions in their families and the channel for the younger generations to connect to Korea. However, they also show a willingness to negotiate their Korean heritage and beliefs, therefore breaking free of gender expectations, in the face of what the host society has to offer them.

The male figures, on the contrary, demonstrate a different outcome. Jacob's reliance on the American dream and his assimilation provokes a gap between him and his family, and Korean values. However, by trying to compensate for the struggles he is undergoing as a migrant, such as the inability to succeed in his dream and self-security, Jacob's grip tightens on Confucian patriarchal role and authority in the family (Kim, 2006). The sphere of masculinity is contested in the host society which accentuates the differences and the issues for migrant men to fit in. Identity negotiation, therefore, emerges as a process also shaped by gender and relationships.

Throughout the three films, the topics of belonging and the understanding of one's own roots are brought to the center of the narrative. Anne, David, and Dong-Hyun live an ambivalent dynamic in which their performance constantly switches between home and external environment, and they often feel pressured to keep alive traditions and values that they have never experienced firsthand (Lee & Kim, 2021). The host society works as a site where their 'foreignness' is highlighted, resulting in ambiguity and struggles in fitting in. This intensifies their disorientation and sense of not fully belonging to either context. Nora also shows a struggle in finding where she belongs to, divided by two important men in her life that mirror her two main identities. Nonetheless, all the younger generations of migrants keep swinging between these two poles, experiencing ambivalent belonging and in-betweenness.

Beyond the thematic similarities and differences across the films, the positionality of the filmmakers also represents an important factor to consider. Although the directors belong to a similar generation, their personal experiences shape different narrative and aesthetic choices. For instance, *Minari* adopts a nostalgic and family perspective, embedded in a collective portrait of migration. On the other hand, *Riceboy Sleeps* presents migration through memory and emotional fragmentation, which is also reflected in *Past Lives*, through a more introspective and cosmopolitan perspective. The

filmmakers' gender also influence which dimensions of migration become central. While *Minari* foregrounds patriarchal pressure and family responsibility through Jacob's character, *Past Lives* places stronger emphasis on female subjectivity and emotional negotiation.

The aesthetic differences between the films reveal that there is not a specific way to depict South Korean migration. Through their visualities, the filmmakers emphasize isolation, ambiguity, emotional loss, and fractured belonging, suggesting that migration doesn't only involve geographical movement, but also emotional and psychological negotiation. Considering their semi-biographic nature, the films emerge as reflexive spaces in which the filmmakers can relive their lives and memories while negotiating their own identities. Therefore, each film's emotional content differs because each director has experienced these events differently, resulting in an intimate and personal reinterpretation.

The films display different types of outcomes in the characters' identities evolution. They highlight the productive nature of cultural identities, specifically in relation to the active role that migrants have, alongside internal and external forces (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025; De Fina, 2006). However, the findings illustrate how the illusion of decision is also an important key element, as migrants navigate in a context in which their decisions can be dictated or limited by material opportunities, family dynamics and host society's prejudices. Furthermore, migrants' identities are depicted in a pendulum of choosing between the opportunities they could gain in America and what they are willing to leave behind regarding their Korean identity. Regardless of the choice, something of oneself will be lost. For instance, Nora's ambiguity hinders her from fully committing to one identity, and Dong-Hyun and Jacob demonstrate both resistance, stuck in their lost sense of belonging.

In this context where both native and host elements merge together, the possibility of forming a hybrid or bi-cultural identity becomes possible (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025), complicating the idea of a fixed cultural identity. The findings suggest that cultural identity under migration cannot be fully understood through a single dimension and fixed acculturation categories, but it must be seen as a dynamic and intersectional process shaped by class, gender, employment, family dynamics and socio-cultural expectations. The fluidity and unfixability of identity appear at the center of its own notion, underlying how different degrees of acculturation strategies are possible, even overlapping one another, therefore challenging Berry's (1997) model. Lastly, cultural identity is to be considered a negotiation, a process, not an outcome, but most specifically as something that is not definite, nor something that aims to be definite. As context-dependent and relational, cultural identity is constantly shaped in migrants' lives.

7. CONCLUSION

This thesis examined how cultural identity is negotiated under migration through the analysis of South Korean migrant films set in North America. By combining narrative and film analysis, the research explored how identity is represented, constructed, and contested across different cinematic contexts.

The findings demonstrate that cultural identity under migration is neither linear nor fixed, but rather a dynamic and context-dependent process. Migration emerges not as an equal opportunity, but as a structurally uneven experience shaped by class, gender, employment and family dynamics. While migrants actively participate in their identity formations, their choices are constrained by external forces such as social expectations, social environment, and experiences of marginalization. Therefore, acculturation cannot be understood as a process of free individual choice, but as a negotiation shaped by both internal and external conditions. Another setting or choice would have created a different outcome in the individuals' identity formation, reinforcing what Hall (1996) and De Fina (2006) have both highlighted in the conceptualization of identity: its re-production.

A key contribution of this study lies in the emphasis on the role of the Korean 'Other' as a catalyst in identity formation. The encounter with figures embodying the homeland, such as family members or past relationships, prompt moments of reflection and re-evaluation, particularly among younger generation. These interactions reveal that identity negotiation is not only shaped by the host society, but also by ongoing connections to the homeland, complicating dominant understandings of acculturation.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that cultural identity is negotiated through specific socio-cultural spheres: Gender and Tensions between home and host society. These spheres emerge as unstable, where belonging is continuously questioned and redefined. The findings highlight how identity is relational and shaped through everyday practices, relationships and family dynamics. Across the films, migrants experience a persistent sense of in-betweenness, suggesting that belonging is not resolved through migration, but remains an ongoing and ambivalent process.

Considering these findings, the thesis contributes to existing literature by challenging fixed models of acculturation, particularly Berry's (1997) framework. Rather than fitting into clearly defined categories, migrants' identities emerge as fluid, overlapping and shaped by intersecting social factors. Furthermore, the research contributes to a growing migration studies field surrounding South Korea by foregrounding films as a valuable lens and perspective. Cinematic representations provide insight into how migrants make sense of their identities, offering both narrative and visual dimensions that are often overlooked in traditional migration studies. Nonetheless, the study is not without limitations. Future research could explore how diasporic films are interpreted by migrant

communities and whether they function as tools for identity formation. Moreover, the role of the Korean ‘Other’ requires further investigation, particularly in relation to real-life experiences. Yoon’s (2022) survey already touches upon the importance of Korean exposure among younger generations; therefore, it would be interesting to delve deeper into this matter and understand how Korea is embodied by key individuals in migrants’ lives.

Lastly, this thesis argues that cultural identity under migration is not an outcome to be achieved, but an ongoing process of production. Shaped by memory, relationships, and context, identity remains fluid, relational, and continuously redefined across time and space.

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