

## SYNTHESIZING IDENTITY: EXPLORING DIALECTICAL ENCOUNTERS IN KACHACHI'S THE AMERICAN GRANDDAUGHTER

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### ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study seeks to reconnoiter the uncharted territory of identity synthesis in The American Granddaughter (2010) through dialectical process of thesis and antithesis, shedding light on how the protagonist, Zeina, negotiates between discordant cultural influences thereby synthesizing her identity. The outcomes of the research reveal that identity synthesis and personal growth have a significant association as evidenced through Zeina's synthesizing her identity, leading to greater self-awareness, acceptance and transformation. The implications of the research zero in on the significance of acknowledging and reconciling frictional cultural identities, contributing to a profound understanding of cultural identity development. The study offers valuable insights for literary interpretations, methodological frameworks and practical applications in various disciplines for example education, counseling and cultural diversity training.*

**Keywords:** *Hegel, dialectical process, cultural identity, identity synthesis, Kachachi, transformation*

### INTRODUCTION

In the domain of identity formation, the dialectic process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis proffers a profound comprehension of the complex negotiation that the individuals take on to align disparate aspects of their personalities. This process is particularly significant for individuals embodying multicultural descents (LEE & Gyamfi, 2023), engaged in dynamic interplay between multiple identities that can yield both transformative as well as deleterious consequences. This tussle assumes a dialectical shape, winning the opposing forces, identities and ideas to reshape and transform into new, emergent forms of identity (Boland, 2017, p. 16), reality and

thought configurations. Rooted in Hegelian philosophy, this process necessitates the synthesis of thesis (host culture) and antithesis (guest culture) integrating the incongruent aspects of conflicting cultures. This recapitulation helps individuals reconcile contradictions, assimilate fragmented identities, eventually emerging with a clearer and refined sense of self. Examining such dialectical encounters yields insightful exposition of the complex and interactive process of identity formation, and reveals individual's adaptation and transformation over time.

In spite of the accumulating evidence of research on trauma and identity, a few studies have explored the significant setbacks to identity synthesis encountered at the individual level by the people living in liminal spaces, strangled in cultural dissonance in terms of identity and allegiances. The current study offers a nuanced exploration of these complexities in *The American Granddaughter*, accentuating the demand for a profound understanding of identity synthesis in conjunction with personal growth and transformation. Coming out of war, occupation, geographical and cultural dislocation, *The American granddaughter* (2010) by Andria Busfield represents the dialectical journey of Zeina, an Iraqi-American protagonist of the novel, confronting the contradictions of her hybrid identity. The multiple experiences she undergoes, first as an Iraqi born immigrant in America and then posted in Iraq as a translator for the American army in Iraq, highlighting the thesis and anti-thesis of identity formation. Offering a close examination of the text, the present study aims at demonstrating how Zeina's character development elucidates the dialectical process, addressing contradictions and integrating fragmented selves, shedding light on the often inadequately addressed issue of identity nexus for the people living in liminal spaces. The main objective of the study is to identify and examine Zeina's narrative arc, characterized by the dialectical conflict of thesis and antithesis, and its ultimate solution. By applying Hegelian dialecticism to Zeina's transformative journey in the novel, the study strives to advance a deeper understanding of the human experience, disseminating support services and interventions for the individuals grappling with identical issues.

## 1.1 Research Statement

The study theorizes that Zeina's character in *The American Granddaughter* showcases a dialectical negotiation of identity nexus or synthesis, marking the thesis and antithesis moments, as she undergoes contradictory cultural influences, leading to higher level of self-awareness, acceptance and transformation. It is also hypothesized that the dialectical process in the novel serves as a framework of reference for identity development in other cultural contexts.

## 1.2 Tentative Questions

1. How do Zeina's struggles with identity in *The American Granddaughter* embody the dialectical process encapsulating the thesis, antithesis and synthesis moments?
2. What theoretical repercussions do these dialectical encounters offer to enhance our understanding of identity synthesis?
3. How can this dialectic struggle lead to personal growth and transformation?

## 2. Literature Review

Kachachi's novel *The American Granddaughter* has been subject to scholarly debate, exploring diverse themes such as trauma (ELnamoury, 2021; Mohammed et al., n.a.), post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD (Khan et al., 2024), cultural displacement and identity crisis in the wake of 9/11 (Alqahtani, 2023), to name a few. This part of the research deals with a detailed overview of existing research on the novel with a special focus on its thematic concerns with trauma, identity formation and transformation.

The initial criticism on *The American Granddaughter* regarded it as a simple expression of identity formation, but the subsequent studies, for example, by (Ammari et al, 2019) recognized its cultural and philosophical significance. Ammari argues that the novel portrays the fears and anxieties of diasporic Iraqi experience. (Fatima et al, 2021) sees it as a replication of politico-cultural tensions of the post 9/11 world. Recent research on novel has explored the cultural and philosophical aspects with scholars like (Majaj, 2020) and (Al-Shammari, 2019) examining the text's handling of themes like imperialism, modernity and gender roles. (Al-Mousawi, 2020) discovered that the novel represents the anxieties of modernity, whereas (El-Gendi, 2019) views the text as a criticism of patriarchal society. The present research is concerned with illustrating the dialectical process lying underneath the surface, bringing the complexities of cultural displacement and identity formation into limelight. Zeina's story, highlighting the potential for transformation and growth in the face of cultural diversity, resonates the Hegelian notion of the unity of opposite forces. Dialectical encounter or process is the transformative or dynamic entanglement of opposing ideas, forces or identities. (Hegel, 1807) This research paradigm

has been studied in various disciplines including philosophy, psychology and literature. In literary studies Hegelian dialectic has been used to explore the intricacies of identity formation and cultural dislocation. One such example is found in Bhabha (1994), with his thesis on the significance of liminality in the formation of identity. Liminality is a state of transition or a buffer which enables individuals to negotiate and synthesize multiple identities, paving the way for deeper comprehension of self and culture.

On the whole, the literature on the American Granddaughter represents a rich tapestry of complex and rich exploration of cultural and philosophical themes. In scholarly circles, the novel remains a remarkable philosophical and cultural touchstone.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This qualitative study investigates the dialectical entanglement between displacement and identity posed by exposure to conflicting cultures in Kachachi's *The American Granddaughter* (2010). Through a systematic and thorough textual analysis, the research uncovers dialectical themes and motifs, examining the protagonist Zeina's identity development. Purposive and theoretical sampling techniques are employed to select relevant sources and identify instances of dialectical struggle, identity formation, and transformation within the text. A close reading technique is used to trace elements of dialectical struggle, identity formation, and transformation throughout the text, while narrative analysis examines speech and content, including philosophical meanings and socio-political-cultural contexts. The study draws on existing scholarship on Hegelian dialectics, identity, and transformation to contextualize the findings.

#### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

The dialectical process was first coined by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher, in his book "Phenomenology of Spirit" (*Phenomenologie des Geistes*) in 1807. The book is considered one of his most important works and a seminal work in the development of dialectics. The dialectical process is a philosophical framework that describes the development and resolution of contradictions. It consists of three stages: Thesis,

representing an initial idea, state, or identity which is encountered by antithesis, a contradictory idea, state, or identity that challenges the thesis; and, synthesis, the higher level of understanding and unity that emerges from the conflict between the thesis and antithesis. In the context of identity formation, the dialectical process can be applied as follows:

➤ Thesis: An individual's initial sense of self and identity.

➤ Antithesis: Experiences, encounters, or contradictions that challenge and conflict with the initial identity.

➤ Synthesis: The integration of the thesis and antithesis, resulting in a refined, evolved, and more inclusive sense of identity.

For example a person may be elated on the thoughts of proud nationalism and patriotic notions. He may then encounter diverse perspectives and experiences that challenge their nationalist views. The settlement of these differing world-views can lead to the development of a more inclusive and nuanced identity, reconciling their national pride with a broader understanding of global citizenship.

Through this dialectical process, identity formation becomes a dynamic and iterative process, shaped by ongoing interactions and contradictions. In accordance with these theoretical insights, the present study postulates Zeina's journey into war and back to normal life, informed by the dialectical encounters between thesis and antithesis, eventually leading to the solution of the two in form of synthesis. In Zeina's case thesis is Zeina's initial beliefs and ideologies about her role in Iraq and her connections with her family and friends; antithesis is enacted with the traumatic experiences and conflicts she faces in Iraq, which shatter her beliefs and force her to confront harsh realities, leading to a transformation of herself; while, synthesis is Zeina's transformed consciousness and her newfound understanding of herself and her relationships, marked by a profound sense of sorrow and disillusionment. Her internalization of war and acknowledgment of her victimhood allow her to begin reconciling her identity and reconnecting with civilian society. Based on these suppositions the study is grounded on the following assumptions:

1. Identity formation is a dynamic and iterative process.

2. Dialectical encounters between thesis and antithesis lead to synthesis.

3. Zeina's experiences in Iraq and her return to normal life can be understood through the dialectical process, with her initial beliefs and ideologies (thesis) encountering traumatic experiences and conflicts (antithesis).

4. The encounter between thesis and antithesis leads to a transformation of Zeina's self and a newfound understanding of herself and her relationships (synthesis).

5.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

*The American Granddaughter* (2010) embodies the dialectical process, unfolding against the backdrop of the American invasion of Iraq. The narrative presents a thesis - Zeina's initial beliefs and ideals as an Iraqi-born woman living in the US, hired as an interpreter for the US army. However, as she witnesses the trauma and tragedy in Iraq, her experiences confront her initial beliefs, forming an antithesis - the harsh realities of war and occupation. The novel traces Zeina's journey as she grapples with the contradictions, leading to a synthesis - her transformed consciousness and disillusionment. The first-person narrative offers a homo-diegetic account of Zeina's dialectical journey, oscillating between her conflicting emotions and sentiments. Born in Baghdad and raised in Detroit, Zeina's dual identity fuels the dialectical tension, as she navigates her return to Iraq in 2003. The story begins at the end, with Zeina attempting to write her story, symbolizing the synthesis of her transformative experience. She commences the narrative inscribing the following words:

I see myself on the screen, a disillusioned saint carrying her belongings in a khaki backpack, wearing a hard helmet and dusty boots and walking behind soldiers who raise the victory sign despite their defeat. Where have I come across this scene before? Was it not also there in Iraq, in a past age, in another life? Are defeated armies bred on the fertile land between the two rivers? (Kachachi, 2008, p. 1)

Zeina's narrative embodies the dialectical process, oscillating between thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Her early life in Detroit, surrounded by family and siblings, represents her initial thesis - a comfortable American identity. However, the announcement of the translator's job in Iraq, with its attractive salary

and benefits, presents an antithesis - a conflicting desire to reconnect with her roots. Zeina's decision to apply, driven by the "American dream" and material motivations, marks a synthesis - a temporary resolution of the conflict. Her past attempt to join the FBI and her mother's discomfort with her American citizenship foreshadow the dialectical tension. Zeina's initial detachment from her Iraqi heritage (thesis) is challenged by her decision to work in Iraq (antithesis), leading to a synthesis - a reevaluation of her dual identity. The disapproval of some community members and her own internal conflicts fuel the dialectical process as Zeina struggles with her loyalties and sense of belonging.

Zeina's arrival in Iraq marks the beginning of synthesis - a transformative process where her beliefs and loyalties are challenged. Her encounters with Rahma, her foster-brothers, and the US army's operations in Iraq create a dialectical tension, as she grapples with her dual identity and the conflicting views of the invasion. Rahma's initial welcome and subsequent disapproval embody the dialectical contradiction, as Zeina's actions are seen as a betrayal of her heritage. The contrast between Zeina's involvement with the US army and her grandfather's heroic service in the Iraqi army highlights the fissure in Zeina's identity. Rahma's attempt to use family history to reconnect Zeina with her Iraqi roots represents a moment in the dialectical process, as Zeina begins to question her choices and loyalties. The image of Zeina wearing her grandfather's uniform over her bulletproof vest symbolizes the dialectical synthesis - a blending of her conflicting identities.

Zeina's encounter with Rahma's stories further highlight the dialectical process, as she grapples with the contradictions between her thesis (her perceived connection to her Iraqi heritage) and antithesis (her feeling of disconnection and strangeness). Rahma's narratives represent the absolute spirit, containing the truth of Zeina's past, but Zeina's inability to fully connect with them reveals a dialectical tension. She detects missing links, symbolizing the limitations of her understanding. Rahma's stories, rich in Iraqi history and culture, constitute the moments of the dialectical process, which Zeina struggles to fully grasp. Her realization that she must become a child to that history marks a synthesis - a higher level of understanding, where she acknowledges her own

role in reconciling the contradictions and finding the missing links. Through this dialectical process, Zeina begins to reconcile her dual identity, recognizing that her true understanding of her heritage lies within herself, as she comments,

It is my history whether I like it or not. It was mine even before I was born. I am its legitimate child, no matter how foreign I may seem. How dare she, that gullible writer, think that I'll just hand over my inheritance to her, even if that inheritance is nothing but a tattered piece of nationalism, good for nothing, a handful of coins in a currency that went out of circulations a long time ago? (Kachachi, 2008, p. 17)

Zeina's encounter with Tawoos and her foster family heighten the dialectical process. The revelation of her foster relationship with Muhaymin and her love for him represents a synthesis - a higher level of understanding, where her dual identity begins to reconcile. Meanwhile, the narrative itself becomes a dialectical battlefield, as the writer Zeina (thesis) struggles with the protagonist Zeina (antithesis) over the direction of the story. The writer Zeina, influenced by patriotic sentiments, seeks to shape the narrative in a particular way, while the protagonist Zeina resists, creating a dialectical tension. This conflict, noted by Sinan Antoon (2010), exemplifies the dialectical process, where opposing forces interact and reconcile, leading to a higher level of understanding and narrative resolution. Antoon comments:

Kachachi's protagonist revolts against the author and takes over the narration in order to resist the author's attempts 'to write a patriotic novel' (34) 'I am stronger than her and I almost pity her naiveté and patriotism', (36) (Antoon, 2010, para 4).

Tawoos's label, "dog with two homes," and Zeina's confession of feeling homeless in both lands, further illustrate the dialectical tension. Her linguistic wavering between English and Arabic, reflecting her twin identities, precedes her arrival in Iraq, setting the stage for the dialectical struggle. This conflict represents the moment of the dialectical process, where the contradictions between her dual identities interact and collide, propelling her towards a higher level of understanding and synthesis - a reconciled identity. Alluding to her wavering attitude to the twin languages she is living, Zeina notes:

English remained the language of the street, work and the news. We would contort our jawbones and

speaking it the moment we stepped outside the house. Our cars took us and our English around from street to street and from mall to mall. Then they brought us back to the zinc covered garages in front of the house, where changed languages again and slipped indoors. (Kachachi, 2008, p. 11)

Working as a "cultural consultant" in Tirkit she convinces herself that she's helping Iraq. Eventually, she witnesses the Iraqis' hostility towards the occupation and the cruel night raids by the armed forces. Despite this, she fails to reconcile the contradictions, remaining loyal to the American mission and identifying as "we". This dialectical tension culminates in her relocation to the Green Zone, which symbolizes tension between safety and danger, idealism and reality, where her commander orchestrates a pretend raid to facilitate her visit to Rahma. The visit heightens the dialectical conflict, as Zeina's attachment to her grandmother and her obsession with Muhaymin, her political rival, intensify. Muhaymin's rejection of her advances and offer of marriage and migration to the US further exacerbates the dialectical tension, setting the stage for a synthesis - a higher level of understanding and reconciliation of her conflicting identities and loyalties.

Zeina's return to Detroit after her first contract expires, where she expects a warm welcome from Calvin, but instead faces a dialectical contradiction - her father and brother's unexpected arrival and her father's warning "beware of Iraqis". This contradiction sets the stage for her return to Iraq under a new contract. Her email exchanges with Muhaymin, now fraught with political disagreements, highlight the dialectical tension. The synthesis emerges during her second visit, as she grapples with her grandmother's death, her own guilt, and the realization of the mission's potential failure. The occupation's four-year milestone and her fellow translator's suicide underscore the dialectical conflict. Ultimately, Zeina returns to Detroit, her memories of her grandmother and experiences in Iraq reconciled, marking a higher level of understanding - the absolute spirit.

By the novel's conclusion, Zeina reaches the synthesis, recognizing the need to reconcile her conflicting identities and narratives. She metaphorically "kills" the internalized writer, symbolizing the dialectical overcoming of her thesis

(her initial identity) and antithesis (the writer's influence). With this synthesis, she achieves a higher level of understanding, embracing her Iraqi heritage and her experiences. Her nostalgic sentiment, "Let my right hand forget me if I forget thee, O Baghdad," signifies the reconciliation of her dual identities, as she finally finds her authentic voice, integrating her past and present. This concluding statement embodies the absolute spirit, where Zeina's dialectical journey culminates in a unified, self-aware narrative.

## Conclusion

In the novel "The American Granddaughter", Zeina's struggles with identity, loyalty, and belonging embody the dialectical process, illuminating the complex and transformative nature of personal growth and identity synthesis. The novel successfully portrays dialectical themes oscillating between ideology and disillusionment, belonging and displacement, patriotism and criticism, and personal and political conflicts. Through Zeina's journey, we see that reconciliation of contradictions and dialectical tensions, where opposing forces interact collide, and ultimately reconcile, is essential for achieving a deeper understanding of oneself and one's place in the world, ultimately leading to a more authentic and unified identity.

The dialectical encounters in *The American Granddaughter* demonstrate that identity synthesis is a dynamic, transformative process, essential for personal growth and self-discovery. Through Zeina's experiences, we see that synthesis is not a static endpoint but a continuous process of reconciling contradictions, leading to a deeper understanding of oneself and one's place in the world. This novel highlights the importance of embracing contradictions and engaging with dialectical tensions to achieve a more authentic, unified identity.

## Recommendations

- The study recommends to investigate the applicability of dialectical theory to other literary works, exploring how characters' struggles with identity, loyalty, and belonging reflect the dialectical process, analyzing the role of cultural heritage and personal experiences in shaping identity, as seen in Zeina's journey, and how this relates to broader discussions on identity

formation. The novel is open to interpretations from multiple perspectives such as psychoanalysis, diaspora issues and cultural studies. Future research can also investigate how the dialectical process in *The American Granddaughter* intersects with various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and history, examining how the novel's deployment of the dialectical encounter sheds light on human behavior, social dynamics, and historical contexts, offering insights into the complex interplay between individual and collective experiences

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