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## The Representation of Identity Crisis in Minari: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Received: 27<sup>th</sup> April 2022| Revised: 6<sup>th</sup> June 2022| Accepted: 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2022  
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### Abstract

This study examines the representation of identity crisis in *Minari*, an American film depicting the life of Korean diasporas in the USA. This study employed Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the identity crisis encountered by the main character and Korean and western cultural contact in the United States of America. The researchers analyzed the main protagonist using psychological perspectives to uncover unconsciousness in his decision-making to obtain the study's objectives. In this study, the main character of this film was Jacob, after undergoing the three stages of Greimas' structural analysis. The main character displayed an identity crisis in discursive actions, non-discursive, and discourse materialization. Further analysis uncovered that immigration was the basis for the identity crisis in *Minari*. Moreover, the identity crisis was described in Jacob's roles in the diaspora process: the first child, husband, and father. Of the three roles, the circumstances experienced in the diaspora process made Jacob struggle with his identity. Fortunately, he overcame the identity crisis, which was symbolized by *minari*, a vegetable, as a symbol of perseverance in the film.

**Keywords:** diaspora, identity crisis, critical discourse analysis, psychology perspectives

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Korean diaspora happens in a long history and is ongoing. There are four groups of Korean diasporas written in history (Yoon, 2012). The first and biggest Korean diaspora group came to Hawaii in 1903. The second group was the group that spread to Manchuria in 1931. The third group started in 1945, following Korea's independence that year. The fourth group occurred in 1963 when the Korean government started an immigration program for white-collar workers and highly educated residents to the US and Canada.

Asian immigrants make up 25% of the entire foreign-born population. They come from nations such as the Philippines, China, India, Vietnam, Korea, and others. After the upheaval in their home country, the majority of these Asian immigrants want to improve their economic situation or obtain a better education to enhance their future lives (Min, 2011b). Because of these motives, they can persevere and finally establish a social life in the United States. Many Korean immigrants demonstrate that the United States is a desirable diaspora destination.

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In this study, the researchers analyze “Minari,” a 2020 film directed by Lee Isaac Chung. There are two research questions: First, how is identity crisis represented in Minari? Second, how does the character in Minari cope with Korean and western culture?

To obtain the study’s objectives, the researchers employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a social and cultural research method. Proponents of CDA agree that CDA covers some basic principles. First, its approach orients to social problems; thus, it needs multi-discipline knowledge. Second, its primary concern is demystifying ideology and power through systemic research of semiotic data. Third, it is reflective in its research process, in which the researcher distances himself or herself to check his or her values and ideologies (Jäger, 2013).

Six basic principles allow CDA to analyze discourses successfully. Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak propose those six essential principles: first, text and context; second, continuity and intertextuality; third, construction and strategy; fourth, social cognition role; fifth, analysis categories implementation rules; sixth, interdiscursivity (Jäger, 2013).

CDA’s object is data which includes documents, discussion papers, parliamentary debates, speeches, cartoons, movies, photos, newspapers, or other media, including political newsletters and pamphlets. An example of CDA examining speeches conducted by Shah et al., (2021), their research applied CDA to examine speeches of Indian and Pakistani Premiers on the Pulwama incident. Sari and Pranoto (2021) analyzed a newspaper to uncover government representation concerning the draft of the criminal code in The Jakarta Post. Furthermore, Tinureh et al., (2020) employed CDA to uncover the landscape of social media and examine the content in Ethiopia.

There are three things discussed individually in a film: discursive actions, non-discursive, and discourse materialization. Moreover, in a film, non-discursive and discourse materialization are depicted more precisely than in other data sources. Recent studies have employed CDA to analyze films. Montes (2020) applied CDA to examine narco culture in Mexican film. Whereas Bilal et al., (2021) applied CDA to uncover the portrayal of Pakistan on the silver screen. Thus, this research provides novelty in applying CDA to uncover the representation of identity crisis and Korean and western culture in Minari.

To uncover the identity crisis in Minari, the researchers utilized a psychological perspective. According to Holland, identity is how an individual understands and perceives himself or herself and how others perceive him or her (Cresswell & Cage, 2019). A variety of factors forms a person’s identity. Identity in the modern world is determined by various factors, including nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, sex, and sexuality, all of which can interfere with the development of character position and result in conflicting, divided personalities (Tusita, 2017).

This complication has the potential to cause an identity crisis. Identity crises are defined by Baumeister et al., (1985) into two types: conflict crises and deficit crises. When a person is devoted to

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several values, roles, or goals, an identity conflict ensues, and the crisis begins because the many commitments prescribe contradictory behaviors. If, on the other hand, the crisis is characterized by a battle to construct an identity because previous commitments are insufficient to drive conduct, then it is characterized by an identity deficit.

Identity deficits should predominantly develop in adolescence and middle adulthood, according to Baumeister et al., (1985). Identity conflicts can happen at any time, but they are more likely to happen when someone has just made obligations and is striving to fulfil them because conflicts with previous commitments are revealed at that time. If this is the case, identity conflicts crises are more likely to arise in the post-adolescent and young adult years. Identity deficits emerge over time, but identity conflicts appear suddenly.

While overcoming an identity deficit necessitates the sacrifice of some options and possibilities, the most crucial component of the process is making new commitments to one's inner self. On the other hand, resolving an identity conflict means removing (letting go of) commitments. Because people usually associate with more than one cultural group, the social character is complicated and multifaceted. The social character is always sanctioned, ordered, maintained, and challenged by communicative hones in a globalized society with expanding intercultural experiences. It may also be seen in diaspora writing, which garnered notice because of its originality, whether through the topics, place, or, most importantly, the culture it brings or the numerous societies it blends into one piece (Sitepu, 2017).

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

To obtain the research objectives, the researchers analyzed the film *Minari*. Moreover, the researcher analyzed the dialogue and scenes in the film. To acknowledge the research question, the researchers implemented a qualitative method.

This research employed Critical Discourse Analysis. According to Jager, CDA for film covers the following steps: first, reconstructing knowledge that is developed in discursive practices; second, reconstructing knowledge that is developed in non-discursive practices; third, reconstructing knowledge that is developed in its materialization and non-discursive practices which have developed discourse materialization (Jäger, 2013).

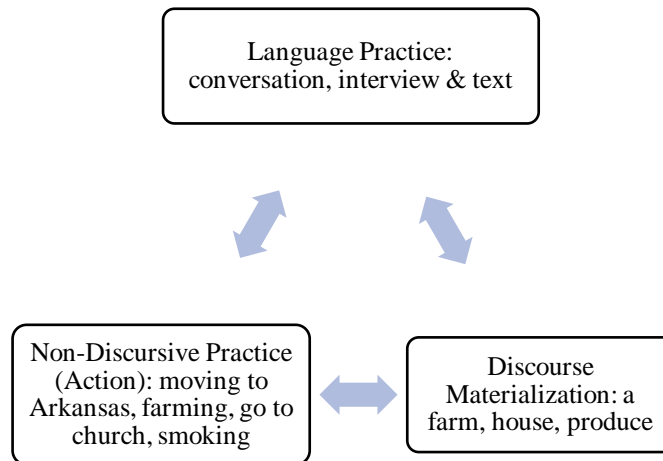


Figure 1. CDA for movie (Jäger, 2013).

The researchers decided on the film's main character/ protagonist/ subject using Greimas' structural analysis (Schoor, 2021). The structural actantial analysis of *Minari* was the following:

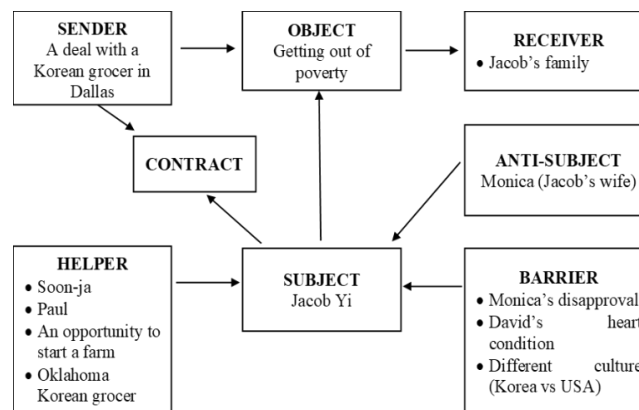


Figure 2. Greimas' Structural Analysis (Schoor, 2021).

First, the search axis covered the relationship between subject and object. Jacob wanted to possess a farm and get out of poverty. Second, the communication axis was the sender delivered the object to the receiver. Those who received the effect are Monica (Jacob's wife), Anne (Jacob's daughter), and David (Jacob's son). In a way, Soon-ja received a positive effect because she could be together with her daughter and grandchildren. The deal with a Korean grocer in Dallas acted as a message sender, motivating Jacob to manifest his adventure. In his efforts to discover the object, the subject received support from the helpers. However, there were also barriers. The helpers and barriers were people and situations, aspirations, nature, or ideas (see the previous figure). Each discovery began with a contract

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between the sender and the subject and concluded with punishment or praise for the subject's or main character's performance.

According to the contract, the sender encouraged the subject's desire to act. Following the contract was three tests that mirror the basic log of human actions. First, the qualification test: Jacob made a deal with a Korean grocer in Dallas to supply Korean vegetables. The Korean grocer trusted Jacob because he attended university majoring in agriculture, although he did not finish his study since he did not have enough money. Second, the principal test appeared in Jacob's struggles to get out of poverty as a Korean immigrant in the USA. His dialogue with Monica showed that he had many commitments to be fulfilled. Jacob was experiencing an identity crisis because of these conflicting commitments. Third, the film's end showed the reward/punishment test. The family stayed together, and Jacob continued to work on his farm. Jacob could make a new commitment and resolve his identity crisis.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 The Conversation which Represents Identity Crisis**

In a conversation between Jacob and Monica, the identity crisis was discussed. The following is the conversation that contained an identity crisis.

- Monica: And where did the money go? To the kids? Because your dream is for the kids?
- Jacob: Don't start.
- Monica: How much money went to the kids?
- Jacob: I had duties as the eldest son, I had to take care of family, and now it's over.  
Everyone at home is well now.
- Monica: Who's home, my mother's home? Our home? Whose home are you talking about?
- Jacob: I said stop!

In this conversation, Jacob faced conflicting commitments that led to an identity crisis, his commitment as the oldest son in his family, as the head of his own family, and his commitment to fulfilling his dream. Furthermore, there was a conversation in which Monica asked Jacob to teach her sexing chicks. Jacob asked Monica to be confident with her intuition to sex the chicks faster. However, Monica doubted this and double-checked the chick's sex, and when she asked Jacob to re-check, Jacob said that Monica was right. It showed conflicting commitments in Jacob. He wanted to commit to finishing his commitment. On the contrary, there were other commitments.

#### **3.2. The Film's Scenes Which are Representative and Meaningful**

The scenes in *Minari* provided vivid illustrations of key moments that illustrate the signs that Jacob was experiencing an identity crisis. Images or visualizations could capture the moment that was going on:

showing Jacob's confusion, Jacob's enthusiasm while working the field, Jacob's dedication to the family, Monica's disappointment with Jacob's attitude. In contrast to words, images or visualizations encourage interpretation, firstly not from something explicit, but through suggestions, connotations, or beats to immediately realize since images are similar to knowledge almost forgotten (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Furthermore, images and visualizations could reveal things that the speaker cannot control, such as intonation, rhetorical images, spontaneous conversations, correcting, or doubting. Thus, it was not surprising that with visualization, the attitude that hid identity crisis, the conflicting cultures of Korea and the United States was shown by the formal/structural features of speech or non-verbal characteristics (gesture, face, body position, distance) in the scenes in *Minari*.

In *Minari*, confusion and uncertainty were revealed through Jacob squatting in his field while saying pleading words. The audience also knew that Jacob would be working his field while driving a rented tractor from another scene. All the audience could imagine Jacob's dedication to the family, from the scene where he worked so hard that he could not even take off his clothes. The scenes already presuppose extraordinary knowledge of one's relationship and attitudes in a household situation in crisis. However, critical discourse analysis observed and described actions and presupposed more profound and detailed knowledge.

In the film *Minari*, there was a scene where Arkansas people were depicted looking very friendly and warm when Jacob's family was at church, but in everyday life, it was depicted when at a friend's house, David only met his friend's father, no other family members were seen. It was not adequate to guess their attitude. There were three ways to help researchers obtain accurate information about the attitude of the Arkansas people (Jäger, 2013): first, study archives, results of previous studies/ research, documents/ literature that discusses this; second, conduct interviews with the people being studied, known as ethnographic method (Jensen, 1978); third, researchers rely on participatory observation (Lundström & Lundström, 2020). It was impossible to use participatory observations consistently when applying critical discourse analysis because of the high cost, distance, and time limitations. Therefore, the researchers studied documents, archives, or previous research. The following table exhibits excerpts from the film that reveal non-discursive knowledge.

Table 1. Excerpts from the Film that Reveal Non-discursive Knowledge

Information	Time
Jacob and David discussed Korean men.	08:52
The first night on the farm was greeted with a tornado warning.	12:08
Jacob's common sense did not believe in water finder.	16:30
Jacob determined the location of the wall based on observation and common sense.	19:24
Financial conditions were limited, forcing an allocation between fields and children.	23:27
Jacob enjoyed cultivating his fields.	25:28
Jacob explained the reason for growing Korean vegetables to Anne.	26:06
At the beginning of planting, there was a difference of opinion between Jacob and Paul.	31:42
Soonja reminded how when Jacob and Monica were still in Korea. They were an	40:54

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inseparable couple.	
Jacob worked so hard that he asked Monica to help with the bath.	59:49
Having spent money and energy, Jacob thought that the harvest was in danger of failing.	1:22:40
Monica asked Paul for help with an exorcism which made Jacob suspicious.	1:27:45
Despite the good news about David's heart condition, Jacob and Monica were still talking about the possibility of a divorce.	1:39:22
Finally, a water finder was hired to make a new well.	1:49:27
The minari that Soonja planted thrive.	1:50:48

The Korean family in Minari represented Korean diaspora in the United States of America. The diaspora happened in a long history and is ongoing. There were four groups of diasporas written in history (Yoon, 2012). The first and biggest Korean diaspora group came to Hawaii in 1903. This group came to sugar plantations, and most of the members in the group were bachelors in their 20s. This first group experienced photographic marriages where these bachelors chose their partners with just a photo.

The second group was the group that spread to Manchuria. Recalling the relationship between Korea and Manchuria throughout history, when Korean workers and peasants lost their means of production, they decided to migrate to Manchuria. This diaspora occurred in the Japanese colonial era. Immigration to Manchuria was also a mount for Japan to carry out the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and build Manchukuo, a puppet state of The Empire of Japan in Northeast China, in 1932.

The third group started in 1945, following Korea's independence that year. The years 1945-1962 were when the Korean government formulated immigration policies for its citizens. The number of diasporas decreased as Koreans living in Japan and Manchuria returned to Korea during this period. However, many Koreans also decided to immigrate to the US almost the same time, such as war orphans, women married to US soldiers, and mixed children from Koreans-Non-Koreans marriages. Back to high levels in 1965, when the US opened the door for immigrants who wanted to come to their country, Koreans already in the US invited their families to come.

The fourth group occurred between 1962 and 1990, cooperation between South Korea and the Soviet Union. The Korean government made immigration policies and designed mass immigration activities with contracts to several areas to reduce demographic pressure. At this time, the government began to send the lower middle class and the upper-middle class. In 1963 the government also sent miners and nurses to Germany. Sending this surplus population abroad also invites foreign currency into Korea because people who work abroad will send money to their families in Korea. The Korean government started an immigration program for white-collar workers and highly educated residents to the US and Canada.



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### 3.3 The Objects' Materialization

There were indirect ways to rebuild knowledge into a materialized form (Jäger & Maier, 2009). To analyze materialization, researchers relied on knowledge about the background they have. In addition, information from the literature or other document sources was also required.

Minari film described how Koreans who were doing diaspora survived in the country where they immigrated. Minari was a sign that Korean society could survive in the United States. In Korea, minari is an edible wild plant or weed that can be added to various Korean dishes.

In one scene that appears in the Minari film, it was described that the grandmother finally found a suitable place to plant minari, a place with water which showed that the minari could grow anywhere as long as it got water, regardless of whether the minari was grown in Korea or another country.

Here was a scene where the minari looked thriving and ready to be picked. In addition, in this scene, the grandmother mentions that minari was a vegetable that could be included in all Korean dishes and consumed by rich and poor alike. Here it showed that minari described the identity of Korean society because it could be found in various kinds of Korean cuisine, even kimchi, the food that was representative of Korea. In addition, minari also showed equality where anyone from any circle would consume minari.

This study brought up the topic of the diaspora concerning the symbol of the vegetable known as minari. It was common in the diaspora for immigrants to lose their identity. It happened because immigrants usually carried out the immigration process as adults, mainly after getting married. Immigrants must adapt to their new environment while also adhering to the values of their origin during the process of immigration/diaspora.

With the notion of bonding social capital and bridging social capital, Lee and Moon (2011) performed a study to understand the factors that encourage Asian immigrants to volunteer to ethnic and mainstream non-profit organizations. Volunteering by immigrants is seen to strengthen these immigrants' social ties to the communities in which they live. In addition, people willingly join groups in their communities to learn information and improve their lives' stability. As a result, volunteering has a dual purpose here, namely altruism and self-improvement.





Figure 1. Jacob's farm in Arkansas was located far from big cities.

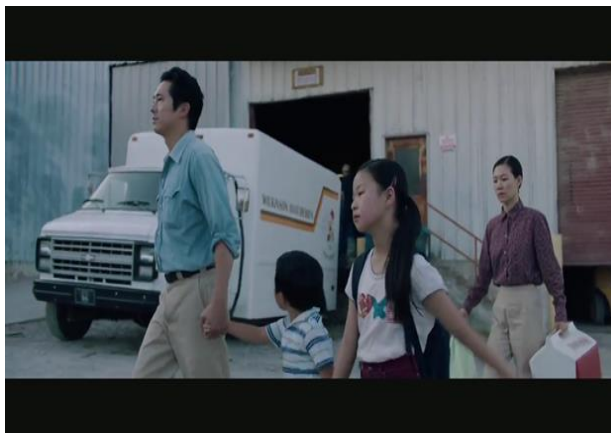


Figure 2. Children had to be brought to work because no family or friends were nearby.

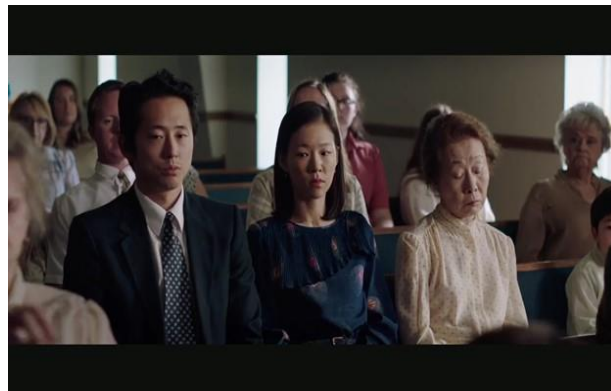


Figure 3. Church in rural Arkansas in which Jacob's family is the only Asians.

### 3.4 The Theorization of Identity Crisis.

The researchers analyzed the main character's identity crisis using a psychological perspective. A psychological approach often saw how individual diaspora actors volunteered to strengthen their position in the social environment in connection with the diaspora. Coaching psychology was often used to help individuals achieve specific goals. By emphasizing positive aspects, this approach brought them to

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gaining achievement. In Seok and Chung's (2021) research, the Minari film directed by director Lee Isaac Chung described the goal of getting comfort, encouragement, and direction in life to those crises.

In this study, minari was used as a symbol. Minari was a vegetable commonly consumed by Koreans, but it was unusual for the USA society. This symbol underlined three aspects, namely adaptability, vitality, and benefits. This vegetable grew well in various environments and grew lush as long as it got the needed fluids. These vegetables were expected to grow from the planted seeds in this film. This event was used as hope in this film, so it could be said that this vegetable contained a "pioneering spirit."

Furthermore, minari was considered a unique power so that this vegetable could be grown both in winter and summer, which symbolized vitality. Lastly, minari was described as a vegetable that could clean contaminated water and grown soil. This characteristic described restoration and reconciliation, the power that minari wielded to become a symbol in a film about Korean immigrants' struggles in the United States.

The American dream was still a concept that people believe in today, especially Korean people. They were seeing the history of the diaspora that happened to Korean people who moved to the US to get a better life. This diaspora history created *gyeopo*, Koreans born in the US or other countries (Min, 2011a). These *gyeopos* had the identity of their country of birth. Unlike the *gyeopo*, the parents of the *gyeopo* were diaspora actors who were faced with a new culture when they were adults, so they experienced an identity crisis. This identity crisis occurred when they were adults and had an old identity according to where they were born and grew up. When faced with the new values adopted by the destination country of immigration, they experienced confusion and gradually experienced an identity crisis. It happened to Jacob, the main character from the film Minari.

In the adult world, the time Jacob was living, responsibility had to be fulfilled. In this case, Jacob showed his responsibility for the three commitments, namely as the first child, father, and farmer. Discussing commitment as the first child, in Korea, there was a culture that the first child must be responsible for his family. Being the first child in his family, Jacob was burdened with the responsibility of his family, so he must take care of and put his family first. He said this to his wife, Monica, when she said she could finally pursue her dream of farming. He asked his wife for understanding to pursue his dream of farming because he had to be responsible for his commitment as the first child.

Although the commitment as the first child had been completed, that commitment affected Jacob's decision to pursue his dream. He even made his commitment to being the first child he had completed to justify his desire to pursue his dream when his wife felt Jacob was going too far. As the first child, his commitment made Jacob responsible for other people's lives. He also felt that it was time to pursue his dream and be happy. Meanwhile, from Monika's perspective, her husband's dream was too reckless. She

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wanted her husband to be more responsible for herself and her children. He did not want Jacob to go overboard in pursuing his dream.

Jacob was the first child of a Korean family who still adhered to East Asian values in connection with the identity crisis. Like other Asians, Jacob had high hopes for the concept of the American Dream when he decided to immigrate. As the first child who used to think about others and bear the family's burden, the American dream seemed to be the way to his dream. Furthermore, in addition to his commitment as the first child, Jacob committed as a farmer. Jacob came to the United States for the first time as a sex separator of chicks, a job he did not want. However, because he wanted to have a better life, he started farming and moved to Arkansas.

Discussing the first son meant talking about Korean family values. Traditional Korean families stood for Confucian patrilineage. In the Choson Korea era, it could be seen that Confucian was used as the ground base of any field in their life, such as education and family value (Haboush, 2014). The distinguishing feature of patrilineality and patriarchy was the family surname. At that time, both the aristocrat clans and commoners used the surname and giving to their kids. However, only the sons could keep the surname after marriage, whether the daughters will pass it to their heirs after marriage. The first son had the right and obligation to carry out ancestor worship (K. K. Lee, 1998). So, even the children might inherit the family properties and name, but the first son had the most significant obligation to fulfil.

In the film, Jacob was faced with the differences between Korean and American farming cultures. In the process of moving, he bought a vast plot of land and dreamed of opening a Korean vegetable plantation. He bought a piece of land far from the city to start gardening with that in mind. Jacob's dream of having his Korean vegetable farm and how Korean immigrants relate to plantations was already discussed throughout history. Koreans immigrated to the US through sugar plantation workers and made their offspring with photographic brides (Yoon, 2012). This phenomenon showed that plantation was viewed as escaping poverty as the significant diasporas were farmers. The main reason immigrants decided to go to other countries was poverty, and they lost their tools to do farming to find a way to get some money for their families through immigration. It could be said that farmers were the biggest perpetrator of immigration.

In a scene, it was shown that Jacob decided not to use the way native people do to find water sources. Arkansas natives used the service of a water finder, where the person would close his/her eyes and use a V-shaped piece of wood to guide him/her to a corner that was believed to be a water source. As a Korean, Jacob found it very absurd and far-fetched. So that they looked for water sources themselves by relying on their knowledge, he even emphasized to his son that Koreans use their brains to solve problems. Jacob was depicted in his cultivation in another scene, still using Korean farming techniques. In

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the scene, he started farming with Paul, an Arkansas native. He placed the plants tenuously while Paul told him to put them closer together, Arkansas style.

From these scenes, it could be said that Jacob had not adapted to local values. He still believed in farming values from Korea. He even decided to grow Korean vegetables predicting that more Koreans would arrive in the US.

Jacob's commitment as a farmer affected his commitment as a father, especially from his wife's point of view. According to Monika, Jacob used the money he should have saved for his children's needs for farming. Monika began to question Jacob's commitment. A scene in the film showed Monika warning Jacob to save money for David's sudden illness. He forbade Jacob to spend money on his plantation. Jacob also promised that he would set aside money for David's needs. The next scene showed when Monika forced Jacob to return to California and abandoned his dream of farming. Monika questions Jacob's decision to farm, whether it was really for the family or his selfishness. Jacob also said that he did not want to return to his former job and pursue his dream. Further, Monika questioned Jacob's commitment as a father. According to her, a father must sacrifice his dream for the sake of his children.

As it was explained previously, the Korean family used the patriarchal line. This value made obligations to the father in a Korean family. There were three primary obligations: family representation in social life, family member supervisor, and family properties controller (K. K. Lee, 1998). From the three primary obligations of the father above, it could be said that a father must be able to look after and be a role model for his family. Jacob held fast to those who did not want to show his failing side to his family, especially his children. He insisted on showing his success and letting his family leave if they wanted to start a life elsewhere. He would continue to work his farm and support his family. This phenomenon was reminiscent of a phenomenon in Korea, namely the goose father or *kirogi appa*.

From the very beginning of its independence, Korea believed in the power of education. As a result, many children from Korean families were sent abroad, especially to English-speaking countries. Because their children were still small, Mom would go to the destination country, and Dad would stay in Korea to earn money to pay for his son's education. Jacob was willing to part with his family to earn a living and provide it to his family. It was often referred to as *kirogi kajok* or wild geese family (Kang, 1979).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that Minari represents a male Korean diaspora facing an identity crisis. The film's discursive actions, non-discursive, and materialization indicates that the main character is experiencing an identity crisis. Moreover, the identity crisis' theorization is supported by the condition of society at that time, which shows differences between Korean and eastern culture in the USA.

Fortunately, the main character can overcome the identity crisis that he experiences. Moreover, *Minari* symbolizes hope, adaptability, and perseverance in the film. The depiction of identity crisis in *Minari* helps diaspora stay faithful in achieving their dreams while living abroad. There are opportunities for fellow researchers to further analyze *Minari*, the film. Comprehensive research is encouraged to study juxtaposing cultural signs in the film, *Minari*, utilizing semiotics approach. Thus, the result is beneficial for people who want to live or study in a new country.

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