

Beyond Cultural Boundaries: A Cultural Theory Analysis of Identity Construction in Contemporary Short Stories

ABSTRACT

This paper used cultural theory as a lens to examine how identity is constructed in contemporary short stories. The study examined how characters traversed cultural borders in their interactions and identities by analyzing a variety of narratives. Social identity theory provided a framework for understanding communication dynamics and group behavior, especially in situations including bias and conflict. The analysis focused on how these short stories illustrated the processes of negotiation, resistance, and adaptation that the characters have gone through in creating their identities in an increasingly interconnected world. Results emphasized instances of stereotyping and labeling and the characters' struggles with assimilation. There was additional emphasis on the importance of empathy and understanding in bridging cultural divides. Overall, this study highlighted the understanding of literary portrayals of identity, providing insights into how stories can bridge cultural divides and foster a deeper appreciation of human diversity.

Keywords: Identity Construction, Cultural Theory, Contemporary Short Stories, Cultural Boundaries, Cultural Contexts, Cultural Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural criticism examined how different religions, ethnicities, class identification, political beliefs, and views affected the ways in which literary texts were created and interpreted [1]. Despite being a unique type of literary criticism, cultural theory still needed to improve in the field of contemporary literary studies concerning its practical applications and the dilemma of recognizing its significance in literature [2]. Cultural theory also examined how the story portrayed various identities, such as gender, color, and class, and how these portrayals either upheld or contradicted cultural norms. In short, cultural theory helped us understand the social, political, and ideological processes that defined a given culture by using short stories as a window [3]. Our Western influences used a specific history to associate particular individual identities, e.g., the East is backward, and the West is civilized. In creating cultural identity, history produced an imaginary effect on people's minds and contributed significantly to the structure of cultural identity [4].

Philippine contemporary stories offered windows into experiences and cultures different from our own, challenged pre-conceived notions and broadened our worldview, providing a space for self-discovery, especially for people from marginalized cultures [5]. In his journal article, *Understanding Theory, Literary Theory, and Literary Criticism*, Bhagat [3] explained that Cultural theory looked at how the story either challenged or reflected the social and political climate of the period in which it was situated or was written. The said theory helped analyze how colonialism has influenced Philippine literature, language, identity, and societal norms. Cultural theory has also shed light on the production and consumption of literature in the Philippines, including issues of access, representation, and power dynamics within the literary field. Filipinos must consider cultural diversity, including race, ethnicity, religion, language, economic status, and sexual orientation, which can influence someone's insights, outlook, and behaviors to foster cultural awareness [6].

The related literature published by Bhagat [3] inspired us to approach literary short stories through the cultural lens by asking if the story is a critique of power disparities or if it serves to uphold the status quo. What did the story reveal about society's attitudes, morality, religion, and families? In his book, *"The Problem of Cultural Identity,"* Hall [7] mainly focused on the dynamic of cultural identity, i.e., how cultural identity is still being constructed and not fully understood, leading many to believe that cultural identity is produced rather than discovered. This persona is imagined and fictitious; people should break it [4]. Research indicated that when people create a multicultural identity, they should focus on two key issues: (a) intercultural contact, or how much people believe they should interact with people from different cultures, and (b) cultural maintenance, or the extent to which people value and preserve their cultural identity and its supplemental characteristics.

Literary subtexts and hidden meanings can be found through cultural critique, exposing the social and political messages writers are trying to get through. Briones [6] also indicated that the government, schools, institutions, and agencies are non-stop promoting cultural diversity and inclusiveness through their programs and policies to build a better community with a mutual and shared understanding of one another. Because of this, we need to improve our approach and consciousness of cultural diversity. Cultural criticism considered the larger cultural environment in which a work is produced and appreciated; it went beyond traditional literary criticism. It used a range of academic fields, including history, psychology, and anthropology, to understand the cultural patterns found in literary works [3]. Educators can help Filipino learners develop their cultural thinking skills through intercultural engagement, cultural understanding, and intercultural communication.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to analyze identity construction in contemporary short stories through the lens of cultural theory. Specifically, it aimed to explore how cultural contexts influence the portrayal of identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality, in a diverse range of contemporary short stories.

THEORETICAL LENS

The framework provided by social identity theory helped explain intergroup behavior and communication based on people's natural desire to positively see themselves and their particular social groups and the intrinsic value they place on belonging to them [8]. Furthermore, Harwood [8] stated that conflict and prejudice between groups might result from this desire. Thus, social identity theory can be applied to the literary media domain to understand better the relationships between literature and media ownership and content, the types of group representations founded in them owned by dominant groups, the selective

consumption of particular media and literary messages by groups, and the consequences of media exposure for members of subordinate and dominant groups [8].

Social identity theory (SIT) used psychological processes related to social identity—a person's perception of belonging to a group and the feelings they link with that membership- to explain relationships between large social groups. Underrepresentation and negative representation are the two main ways marginalization had traditionally been implemented [8]. Certain groups, like indigenous peoples, were comparatively represented in far fewer numbers than the overall population. For groups with a critical mass of depictions, negative representations were analyzed in terms of stereotype representations and generally negative portrayals (Dixon, 2017).

People actively sought for literary content that fitted their interests and requirements. Social identification motives accounted for some of this practice [8]; [Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010]. Individuals who actively sought out content with a particular group they identify with are more likely to enjoy it and derive identity-related satisfaction from it [9]. However, it can also be selectively consumed by members of dominant groups in ways that limited exposure to representations of marginalized groups.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed the "Directed Content Analysis Approach. The application of conceptual categories to a new context is known as directed content analysis [10]. Directed content analysis should be used with existing theory or prior research about an incomplete phenomenon to validate or conceptually extend a theoretical framework or theory [11] In 2005, Hsieh and Shannon [11] created two methods for carrying out directed Content Analysis. The first strategy was to read textual material and mark passages that initially seem connected to the preset codes specified by a theory or previous study findings. The highlighted passages would then be coded using the preset codes. Following the initial coding procedure, the researcher should revisit and reanalyze the text using both strategies [10].

The term "code" was used to refer to the various levels of abstraction as a critical component of the methodology proposed by Hsieh and Shannon [10]. Furthermore, this related literature stated that uncoded data are identified and subsequently evaluated to ascertain whether they belong in a new category or as a subcategory of an already-existing code. Deductive or directed content analysis were used to test and corroborate the pertinence of the theory guiding the study or to extend the application of the theory to contexts/ cultures [11].

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed to examine how the chosen narratives portrayed and interacted with cultural theory concepts like hegemony, resistance, representation, and symbolism. Specifically, it urged to answer the question:

- How did characters in contemporary stories deal with complex identities, and what did this reveal about identity construction?
- How did modern stories help break down cultural barriers and foster understanding among diverse identities?
- How did contemporary stories reflect changing ideas about identity in our interconnected world, and did they challenge traditional notions of identity and belonging?

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Marginalization and Stereotyping

In "Some Days You Can't Save Them All," the line "They were a family of scavengers" exemplified how characters were often marginalized and stereotyped based on societal perceptions. Similarly, "The Talisman" echoed this theme as characters were judged and labeled as "intruders," reinforcing marginalized individuals' challenges in asserting their identities amidst societal prejudices. Through these portrayals, the stories unveiled the pervasive impact of marginalization and stereotype representations on identity construction, prompting critical reflection on societal norms and biases.

Cultural Negotiation and Belonging of Individuals

Lines like "When I passed by the stream, I would make the sign of the cross and sing Christian hymns" reflected the theme of cultural negotiation and belonging. Characters navigated their identities within diverse cultural contexts, reconciling different belief systems and practices to establish a sense of belonging within their communities.

Table 1. Lines which characterize the characters' experiences of Social Identity

Research Problems	Some Days You Can't Save Them All	The Last Guardian	The Talisman	Daddy's Shoes	The Pregnant Women from Zamboanga
Social Identity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> "They were a family of scavengers." "Nagtatanim lang po ng mais at kamoteng kahoy." "Dok, wala po kaming kakilala dito sa Maynila." "Eh kasi Dok, wala ho talaga kaming pera." "I saw the greasy hands, the mismatched slippers, the old stab wound, the faux eyelashes, the eagle tattoo, the forearm track marks, the plastic rosary, the torn t-shirt, the fancy dress, the mobile phone kept intact by a rubber band, the Saudi gold, and the Rolex, and I treated them all the same." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> "Your children and I will be waiting for you." "I'm the man of the house now." "We people of the plateau found out that with money, we no longer needed to gather fruits and hunt game in the forest." "This quest is for all the Manobo people." "The gall of these intruders." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> "Tefu is here," Fedawdaw said. "That is special. I rarely see him, Amung. He is always busy with his work in Cotabato." "But Mesila, Amung, doesn't know how to read and write. He did not go to school. He doesn't know how to drive a vehicle. Don't compare him to Tefu." "You want to marry a city girl. You want someone like you." "Tefu studied in Notre Dame High School, as a scholar of a priest, and he's working in Cotabato now as the driver of the bishop." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> "Daddy had to be buried without his shoes." "He wore his black cotton socks, they said, but his shoes just couldn't fit in anymore." "Daddy referred to them as his 'dress shoes.'" "He knew what he wanted, the soft black leather shoes were obviously made for him." "He was very particular about the way his shoes looked." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> "When I passed by the stream, I would make the sign of the cross and sing Christian hymns." "But since dusk had fallen, we passed by the stream without making a sound." "Stomach pains were caused by microbes in drinking water." "Maybe it wasn't the children or the engkantos's fault that they had stomachaches" "That night, my sweat was as cold as the stream when it flooded."

Cultural Resilience and Identity Preservation of Different Community

The lines "I'll never let anyone take away who we are" and "When the people from the plains came, their priests told me spirits were evil, our old ways were not pleasing to the man who died on the cross. So I drove my akaw away" highlighted the theme of cultural resilience and identity preservation. In the face of external pressures and cultural hegemony, characters asserted their cultural heritage and resisted assimilation. These narratives depicted the importance of cultural pride and the preservation of traditional practices as essential components of individual and collective identity.

Challenges of Assimilation and Cultural Varieties

"This is no longer your home" and "You want to marry a city girl. You want someone like you" illuminated the challenges of assimilation and cultural hybridity. Characters grappled with the tension between maintaining their cultural identity and adapting to societal expectations. These narratives underscored the complexities of navigating multiple cultural influences and highlighted the internal conflicts and external pressures individuals face in reconciling their heritage with contemporary norms. Through these portrayals, modern stories provided insight into the complexities of cultural negotiation and the quest for belonging in a diverse society.

Table .2 Lines which characterize the characters' experiences of Cultural Barriers

Research Problems	Some Days You Can't Save Them All	The Last Guardian	The Talisman	Daddy's Shoes	The Pregnant Women from Zamboanga
Cultural Barriers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "In a hospital where everyone always seemed to be in a hurry to do something or go somewhere else, I made it a point to sit down and greet my patients with the most important question in clinic: 'Anong kuwento mo sa akin ngayon?'" 2. "The impulse is to study out of fear: fear of being humiliated, looked down upon, punished with Sunday duties, banned from the operating room, or removed from the program too soon." 3. "As a clinical clerk and a medical intern, I saw how my PGH residents then struggled to provide the best possible care to patients despite 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I'll never let anyone take away who we are." 2. "When the people from the plains came, their priests told me spirits were evil, our old ways were not pleasing to the man who died on the cross. So I drove my akaw away." 3. "I won't teach you any fighting techniques. In fact, I won't teach you anything. Advices from other people won't be much of a help. Everything you need to know is already in you." 4. "The old man is a traitor. He'd rather be a servant of the enemy and enjoy temporary 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "But Mesila, Amung, doesn't know how to read and write. He "This is no longer your home." not go to school 2. "He doesn't care about his tribe. I bet he doesn't tell people in Cotabato that he's a Teduray, that his family lives in the mountains." 3. "The men your age here already has children." 4. "You want to marry a city girl. You want 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Daddy had to be buried without his shoes." 2. "He held a tea-colored drink in one hand, mine in the other, both of us not knowing if he even knew we were there." 3. "The large mole moved only a fraction. His eyes finally noticed the pair of dark leather on the glass counter. Both eyebrows now rose with undisguised pleasure." 4. "He wore his black cotton socks, they 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Who could she be? was the question in my mind." 2. "I kept quiet since it was hard to argue over something they themselves had not seen." 3. "You still believe in ghosts?"

	the hospital's limited resources." 4. "Nagtatanim lang po ng mais at kamoteng kahoy." 5. "Ganyan talaga ang buhay,"	benefits than stand up with his tribe." 5. "That Wot! He has poisoned your mind against the people from the plains."	someone like you."	said, but his shoes just couldn't fit in anymore." 5. "Daddy had to be buried without his shoes."	
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Empathy and Compassion Across Boundaries Traditions

The lines "To be heard is a human need. To listen is where compassion begins" and "I treated them all the same" underscored the theme of empathy and compassion across cultural and social boundaries. In an interconnected world, characters in contemporary stories were depicted as transcending traditional divisions and treating others with empathy and understanding regardless of cultural or social differences. These narratives challenged the notion of rigid identity categories and promoted a more inclusive worldview based on shared humanity and compassion.

Adaptation and Resilience in Cultural Identity

- Conversely, lines such as "What the other chieftains don't see is that for the people of the plateau to survive, we must adapt to the times" and "But Iboh had money, hadn't he? Didn't he learn to farm and raise livestock?" highlighted the theme of adaptation and resilience in cultural identity. In an interconnected world characterized by rapid change and globalization, characters must adapt to new circumstances while preserving their cultural heritage. These narratives challenged traditional notions of identity by portraying characters who navigated complex cultural landscapes with resilience and creativity, shedding light on the dynamic nature of identity in contemporary society.

Table .3 Lines which characterize the characters' experiences of Cultural Barriers

Research Problems	Some Days You Can't Save Them All	The Last Guardian	The Talisman	Daddy's Shoes	The Pregnant Women from Zamboanga
Challenge in Traditional Notions	1. "We are not here to do what is easy. We are here to do what is right 2. "I treated them all the same." 3. "No longer was I responsible just for my actions; I now had to look after my junior residents as well." 4. "To be heard is a human need. To listen is where	1. "It wasn't muscular strength that enabled me to capture my akaw. I won't teach you any fighting techniques. In fact, I won't teach you anything. Advices from other people won't be much of a help. Everything you need to know is already in you." 2. "What the other chieftains don't	1. "But you know that if an ungit is used to attract a woman, it will lose its power as a hunting talisman." 2. "But Iboh had money, hadn't he? Didn't he learn to farm and raise livestock?" 3. "I'm sorry, Iboh. I am of no help to you. I no longer know how to use spears and arrows."	1. "The children ran to the swings and tried to touch the dark sky." 2. "I arrived in the large, silent house burdened with a bag of the evening's meal. There was no light. We hadn't paid the electric bill in the last six months." 3. "His eyes finally noticed the pair of	1. "I kept quiet since it was hard to argue over something they themselves had not seen." 2. "The next day, the road was constructed. We named it Fatima, the pregnant woman snatched from Zamboanga."

	<p>compassion begins."</p> <p>5. "Would these words alleviate her pain, even by a tiny bit? Or was the token apology only a means to exculpate myself?"</p> <p>6. "Kahit po operahan namin siya ngayon, wala na pong mabuting maitutulong sa kanya."</p>	<p>see is that for the people of the plateau to survive, we must adapt to the times."</p> <p>3. "I won't be stingy with my praise, Chieftain. You deserve the reputation for having a way with plants. You use the same ingredients as others do, but your hand adds magic to the quid."</p> <p>4. "They are saying the tracks of land we lent them are now theirs. They have what they call a title, a piece of paper, from what they call the government."</p> <p>5. "It's just that . . . Oh, Timuk, it's too dangerous. For nine days, you have to stay in the lakeg tree without food, and then you will fight the spirit-guardian when it appears. Do you really have to do this?"</p>	<p>4. "You always prepare a feast for him. When he finished studying in the Catholic school, you slaughtered a wild boar and two deer."</p> <p>5. "Now, my dear husband, what are we going to eat tomorrow?"</p> <p>6. "Stop griping, Amung. Tefu may not be my eldest or strongest child, but he is the most intelligent. He deserves to be honored by his father."</p>	<p>dark leather on the glass counter. Both eyebrows now rose with undisguised pleasure."</p> <p>4. "Outside, along the store's concrete wall, curious eyes try to put a story behind the leather shoes..."</p> <p>5. "He told me once how thick ankles looked so 'common."</p>	<p>3. "You still believe in ghosts? Maybe it was just Nong Karyo's wife we saw since until now they still hadn't found their goat."</p>
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3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Marginalization and Stereotyping

In contemporary short stories, characters often wrestled with the effects of marginalization and stereotyping, which greatly shaped their identities. In "Some Days You Can't Save Them All," the depiction of a family as "scavengers" served as a distressing example of how society imposed limiting and negative labels on people based on their socio-economic status. This characterization reduced the family to a single, judgmental identity, ignoring the complexities and humanity of their members. The label of "scavengers" not only demeaned them but also confined them to a societal role that is difficult to escape, thereby hindering their ability to express their full, multifaceted selves.

Assigning labels like "scavengers" went beyond disrespect. It revealed underlying societal prejudices that significantly impacted every aspect of these characters' lives. In "Some Days You Can't Save Them All," society reduced the family's identity solely to their poverty and means of survival. This limited view confined them to a marginalized position, neglecting their potential and individual qualities. It highlighted the ongoing challenge faced by marginalized groups as they asserted their identities in a setting marked by prejudice and discrimination. The narratives not only preserved the unique cultural landscapes of the Philippines but also empowered communities by giving voice to their experiences and aspirations.

Likewise, in "The Talisman," characters were labeled as "intruders," highlighting their isolation and exclusion. This label reinforced the societal view that these characters were outsiders who did not fit in. The word "intruder" implied they were unwanted and even dangerous, further separating them from the mainstream. This type of stereotyping was especially harmful because it pushed them to the fringes and actively pushed them away. It strengthened the idea that they were different and made it even harder for them to be accepted and to belong.

Readers can better comprehend the intricacies of Filipino society and the problems of people who were frequently disregarded or misunderstood by using the lens provided by the themes of marginalization and stereotyping. The narratives encouraged readers to critically examine their beliefs and the systems that keep these biases alive. Ultimately, the stories advocated for a more well-rounded understanding of identity, one that appreciated each person's unique experiences instead of resorting to oversimplified and potentially harmful stereotypes.

Cultural Negotiation and Belonging of Individuals

The themes of cultural negotiation and belonging were pivotal, reflecting the complex and dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, as well as the diverse cultural influences that shaped Filipino identity. As indicated in the DepEd Module of 2019 entitled "Literary Texts across the Philippine Regions", Philippine contemporary literature often explored the concept of hybrid identities, where characters negotiated their sense of self amidst a blend of indigenous, colonial, and global influences. This hybridity reflected the country's history of colonization and its ongoing interactions with the global community. Literature became a space where authors can explore how individuals reconcile their native cultural heritage with external influences, that led to a more nuanced understanding of identity.

The negotiation of culture in literature highlighted the tension between preserving traditional practices and embracing new, often Westernized, ways of life [13]. Authors depicted characters who strived to maintain their cultural heritage while also adapting to contemporary realities. This duality showcased the resilience of Filipino culture and its ability to evolve without losing its core essence. With a significant portion of the Filipino population living and working abroad, themes of belonging and alienation were prevalent as characters navigated life in foreign lands, grappled with homesickness, and attempted to forge new identities while staying connected to their roots. These narratives reflected broader questions about nationhood and the fluidity of cultural boundaries. These revealed the ongoing processes of identity formation, cultural preservation, and adaptation in a rapidly changing world.

CULTURAL BARRIERS

Cultural Resilience and Identity Preservation of Different Communities

In fancy words, this pressure to conform is called "cultural hegemony," but these stories showed how important it is to hold onto who we are. These stories also showed a deep pride in traditions and where people came from. The characters were like keepers of their culture's

history and wisdom like family treasures passed down. These stories also reminded us why having many different cultures was essential, a reminder to respect and learn about other cultures, not just our own. The themes of cultural resilience and identity preservation highlighted the strength and adaptability of Filipino communities in maintaining their cultural heritage while facing external influences and internal transformations [22]. The rich and varied cultural histories of numerous communities were frequently celebrated in contemporary literature. By showcasing traditional practices, folklore, and indigenous knowledge, literature helped to preserve these cultural elements for future generations. By telling stories rooted in local traditions and experiences, Filipino authors asserted the value and relevance of their cultural heritage [23]. The preservation of cultural identity was often depicted through the interactions between different generations. The chosen narratives emphasized the importance of family and community in sustaining cultural continuity and fostering a sense of belonging.

Challenges of Assimilation and Cultural Varieties

Contemporary short stories explored how cultures mixed and changed over time. These stories dug deep into people's struggles when their cultures mixed. Characters felt lost, unsure of where they belong, caught between their old ways and the new things around them. Their experiences showed us a smaller version of the more significant problems societies faced with different cultures living side-by-side. They showed the strength that came from having many different cultures. By showing characters who held onto their traditions, the stories made us think about our ideas of what is "normal" and what it meant to belong in a world with many cultures.

Contemporary literature often portrayed characters who struggled with the conflict between assimilating into a dominant culture and preserving their cultural heritage [24]. This identity conflict can lead to personal and communal challenges, as individuals navigated their sense of self in relation to both their native traditions and the broader societal expectations. Literature became a medium through which these struggles were articulated and explored. As communities and individuals adapted to dominant cultural norms, there was a fear that unique cultural practices, languages, and traditions may be forgotten or diminished. These stories created a sense of continuity and pride in the reader by encouraging them to cherish and preserve their cultural heritage. Older generations may strive to uphold traditional practices, while younger generations might be more inclined towards assimilation due to modernization and global influences. This generational dynamic added depth to the exploration of cultural identity and continuity.

CHALLENGE IN TRADITIONAL NOTIONS

Empathy and Compassion Across Boundaries Traditions

Lines like "Everyone needs to be heard, and listening is how you start to care" and "I treated everyone the same way" from Ortega's story, showed characters reaching out to others, despite their differences. These stories challenged the idea that people must fit into a certain box based on their culture or background. Compassion and empathy allowed readers to enter the lives of people from diverse origins, which aided in bridging cultural gaps. By portraying diverse traditions, values, and experiences, contemporary Philippine literature fostered a deeper understanding of and respect for the multifaceted nature of Filipino society. This can lead to greater social cohesion and mutual respect among various cultural groups. Readers got an understanding of and appreciation for the worth and dignity of every person, regardless of background, through emphatic storytelling. This nuanced understanding can lead to more empathetic and inclusive attitudes.

Narratives that emphasized empathy and compassion can play a role in healing and reconciliation, especially in the context of past and ongoing conflicts. This is particularly relevant in post-colonial societies like the Philippines, where historical traumas continued to impact contemporary relationships. These themes highlighted the interconnectedness of human experiences, encouraging readers to look beyond their own perspectives and engage with the lives and struggles of others. They facilitated conversations about cultural differences and commonalities, enriching the readers' viewpoint and fostering a more interconnected world. The stories also encouraged us to look inward and ask ourselves how kind and compassionate we can be. They showed how listening and understanding can improve things. These stories challenged how we think about who we are and how we fit in, and they gave us ideas on how to build communities where everyone feels welcomed.

Adaptation and Resilience in Cultural Identity

These stories talked about cultures facing new challenges, like the line "Our people need to adapt to survive in these changing times" from *The Last Guardian Seeker*. They also showed that characters were capable of learning new things and mix their traditions with new practices, like the line, "He learned new ways of farming and raising animals, even though it was not what his people traditionally did" from *The Talisman*. Themes of adaptation and resilience in cultural identity highlighted the dynamic and evolving nature of Filipino identity amidst various social, political, and economic changes. Identity was not static; it continually transformed in response to changing circumstances [25]. Literature reflected this by portraying characters and communities that adapted to new realities, blending traditional and contemporary elements to create a dynamic cultural identity [26]. This blending of indigenous, colonial, and global influences illustrated the resilience of Filipino culture in maintaining its core values while incorporating new elements.

Cultural resilience was not just about preservation but also about adaptation and innovation [27]. Stories often explored how specific landscapes, whether rural villages, urban neighborhoods, or diaspora communities, shaped and sustained cultural identities. The depiction of these settings reinforced the connection between cultural practices and the environments in which they thrived. Literature became a tool for marginalized and indigenous communities to assert their identities and challenge dominant narratives that have historically silenced or misrepresented them.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, contemporary short stories serve as insightful companions, offering a glimpse into the complexities of identity within our globalized world. These stories delve into themes of marginalization, cultural negotiation, and resilience, revealing the complex nature of who we are. Challenging stereotypes and promoting empathy reminds us that belonging is not about conforming to a singular mold but embracing the richness of diverse cultures and experiences. As cultures adapt and evolve, our identities remain fluid, shaped by a continuous interaction between traditions and new encounters. These stories inspire us to celebrate our unique backgrounds and advocate for a more inclusive world where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

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