

Introduction call her  
own (pangok 1). this



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## **Introduction**

There are many reasons why an author may decide to write a book that is different from other books out there. They include entertainment, education of the reader among others.

The author uses themes in order to attain their objective. Themes can be conceptualised as the general ideas or messages that the author desires to put across to the reader. A book or any other writing may have one theme or many of them. The themes may be independent of each other, or in some cases, they may be intertwined with one another. Bich Nguyen's "Stealing Buddha's Dinner" is not an exception. There are many themes that are discernible throughout this memoir.

The book is regarded by many as a memoir that depicts Bich's life as a war refugee in America (Grousel 26). The memoir relates, in first person narrative, how Bich's family run away from Vietnam to America in search of

abetter life. Themes such as food, culture, identity, and communism are some that are to be found in this memoir.

## **The Theme of Identity**

For the better part of her life, Bich struggles to create an identity that she can call her own (Pangok 1).

This is especially so given the fact that she is growing up within a community that has a different culture from that of her family. She is a Vietnamese girl growing up in white dominated Grand Rapids region of Michigan State (Hinstel 18). Bich is exposed the American culture given that she has to attend school and interact with the white children. This is unlike her grandmother who is able to sustain her Vietnamese identity with few challenges.

The grandmother keeps a shrine in her house that is dedicated to Buddha (Malinowski 4). She also withholds her Vietnamese culture through the food that she prepares for the family. She prepares traditional Vietnamese cuisine such as the “ sticky green rice” (Bich 37). More than anything else, Bich desires to attain the American identity (Pangok 3). She realises that she is an outsider in the American society, and her only hope is enculturation. She has to immerse herself into the American culture so that she can fit in with the American crowd. Like any other human being, Bich is terrified of being different.

This is especially so considering the fact that the white society looks down on the minorities in their midst. The need for an all American identity was also

promulgated by the media (Cao 76). Bich remembers the signs that adorned the highways, “.... flags proclaiming ‘ An All American City’....” (Bich 10).

## **Food and Identity**

Food forms a very important part of one’s cultural identity.

As Cao aptly puts it, there are a lot of meanings attached in food, and the meanings are like “ additional flavours” to the food (Cao 64). Either consciously or subconsciously, Bich seems aware of this fact. She literally tries to eat her way into the American identity (Pangok 3). Bich is convinced that if she can eat the American food, she will become an all American, albeit from the outside. This is why she indulges in American food such as “.... hamburgers with onions, hot chocolate, (and) fried chicken....” (Bich 87).

In this, the interplay between the media and self identity is evidence. The television commercials glorify fast food, and Bich is under the impression that this is the hallmark of an American identity. She wants to eat the food that is advertised on television. She was very attached to this food to the point of becoming anxious. She wished all the food in her home to be all American; “.... every time I opened the fridge, I would wish for the food inside to magically turn into American food..... [author’s paraphrase]” (Bich 28). She would even go to the extent of stealing money to satisfy her cravings.

This was especially so given that Rosa, the woman that her father married, was frugal (Cao 70). She even went as far as to despise the food that her family ate. This is because she identified it with Vietnamese culture, which

was lowly regarded in an all American city. She regarded American as the food for “ normal people” and she wanted to be a “ normal” person (Cao 69).

## **Identity Crisis**

An identity crisis is visible throughout the memoir.

Despite her indulgence in American food, Bich felt that she never fitted within this society. She felt she was an outsider. The identity crisis extended even within her family. Not only could she not fit within the community, but she was also an outsider within the family. Many are the times she felt relegated into the background, at home and in school (Hinstel 21). This was aggravated when her father married Rosa (Malinowski 5). The latter was an American Mexican. She brought to the family a half-sister and a half-brother for Bich.

Bich could identify with her siblings since they were of different cultural extraction. Her grandmother was comfortable with her Vietnamese heritage. She had no need to change in old age. This left Bich alone. Bich’s identity crisis was not helped by the fact that she lacked a stable family to support her. Her father was only concerned with his feather factory job and his friends with whom they drunk together, her sisters and brother expunged her out of their worlds, her grandmother was busy with her Buddha shrine while her step mother lacked to in maternal guidance (Cao 71).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is important to note that it is not Bich alone who has an identity crisis in this memoir. Identity crisis is evidence in the life off the other characters, albeit in varying degrees. Bich’s grandmother could not

identify with the American cuisine. When the family ate out, “..... her (grandmother’s) dislike for the fries was as evidence as the masks that we wore.....” (Bich 38). Rosa’s son with Bich’s father also has an identity crisis. He is born of a Vietnamese father and an American Mexican black mother.

## **Works Cited**

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