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IDENTITY AND HERITAGE IN GARCIA'S *OF WOMEN AND SALT*:A DIASPORIC STUDY

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Abstract
This paper examines the entanglements of identity and heritage in Gabriela Garcia's Of Women and Salt (2021), and interrogates the ways in which these ideas are formed, inherited and contested in diaspora. In a critical diasporic light, the novel presents the impact of displacement, migration, memory and intergenerational trauma on the lives of Latina women moving through cultural dislocation and political conflict. This study investigates how the novel projects mother-daughter relationships, language, memory and exile as key components of diasporic identity. The paper also demonstrates that Garcia places heritage not as static inheritance but as ongoing process. Frequently, this is painful process of recollection and reinterpretation. This research portrays characters' struggle to define home especially when home is a moving entity. By putting female voices at its centre, Of Women and Salt disrupts white supremacist history in order to record the endurance of people in the face of loss and violence. It also creates the possibility of people to reinvent themselves and their world. Conclusively, this project contends that Garcia's novel provides a sophisticated consideration of how diasporic subjects make sense of self through ruptures and continuities. Besides, where one's background is both wound and salve, and identity is formed and reformed by the push and pull between remembering and forgetting history.

***Keywords*:** Cultural identity, diaspora, identity, heritage, intergenerational trauma, cultural violence

Introduction and Background of the Study

This research, through the experiences of Maria Isabel, Carmen, Jeanette, Gloria and Ana examine how memory, migration and socio-political forces impacts their identity. This research also foregrounds the tension between remembrance and amnesia, especially in regard to immigrant assimilation and cultural hybridity. Through framing Garcia's novel in relation to the wider conversation around diasporic literature, this thesis hopes to enrich existing conversations in scholarship around issues of heritage and self-hood in migratory narratives. Additionally, using Hall's theoretical lens, this study will showcase how identity is not fixed but an evolving process informed by historical and cultural circumstances. This study ultimately aims to elucidate the complexities of diasporic existence, emphasizing the tension in constantly working to bridge personal and collective histories.

Displacement, trauma, generational resilience, Cuba and the United States provide the backdrop of the novel which interweaves the tales of several women over several generations. It primarily follows Jeanette, a Cuban American battling addiction, and her mother, Carmen, a Cuban immigrant who questions her identity. The novel also brings home the harrowing experiences of undocumented immigrants, as told through the story of Gloria, a Salvadoran woman detained by U.S. immigration authorities, and her daughter, Ana. Through a

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deliberately broken, non-linear narrative, Garcia mimics the jagged, pieced together quality of diasporic memory and heritage. Each chapter flits through time and space—from 19th-century Cuba to contemporary Miami—reflecting the notion that identity is not a static construct but an ongoing negotiation of history, migration and culture in progress. In doing so, Garcia counters the idea of a static identity and instead depicts identity as fluid, influenced by political forces, individual trauma and cultural dissonance. Perhaps the most striking element of the novel is its treatment of intergenerational trauma and how the past haunts the present. Jeanette's ancestor Maria Isabel is the earliest matrilineal link in the novel, living in 19th-century Cuba and laboring in a cigar factory where she clandestinely learns to read. She stands up boldly to the colonial authority, the scourge of gender oppression; as such, she lays the groundwork for the generations of women that follow, each of them grappling with other, yet intertwined, forms of exile and erasure.

Hall's (1996) notion of diasporic identity plays an especially expressive role in Garcia's novel. He argues that diasporic subjects dwell in a "third space," negotiating between the traditions of their homelands and the host nation's culture. It is the liminal space where identity is always being reconstituted, not entirely belonging to the past, nor fully becoming the present. This theory applies well to Carmen and Jeanette who are at varying ends of the cultural negotiation spectrum. Carmen is the type who, in her struggle to survive in America, turns her back on her Cuban roots. She withholds from Jeanette an education in Spanish, and she never speaks about Cuba, a tacit act of forced assimilation all too familiar for immigrants. Hall's contention that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" seems apt here. Carmen decides to rewrite her narrative by excising parts of her past, but this very act of forgetting ruptures her and *Jeanette* (Grossberg et.al, 1996, pp. 87–107). The novel also addresses Hall's concept of hybridity, which posits that identity is constructed at the intersection of different cultural influences. Jeanette's relationship with Ana, the daughter of an undocumented immigrant, for example, shows solidarity crouched among displaces. Although Jeanette isn't facing deportation to the same extent that Ana and Gloria are, her trajectory mirrors an emotional and cultural alienation that reflects on Hall's claim that "diaspora identities are those that are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew" (Hall, 1996, p. 101).

Another critical element in *Of Women and Salt (2021)* is the transmission of trauma across generations—a theme closely tied to diasporic identity. Garcia portrays how trauma is inherited not just through personal memory but through silence, repression, and fragmented storytelling. Maria Isabel's resistance to colonial rule is echoed in Carmen's quiet defiance against assimilation and Jeanette's struggle to reclaim lost heritage. However, this transmission is not linear, it is ruptured, distorted and often painful. Gloria and Ana's story expands this conversation by juxtaposing documented and undocumented diasporic experiences.

Cultural identity is a very popular concept now a days especially in multicultural societies where the subjective identities of people shape them collectively or socially. "Cultural identity is not fixed, but rather a dynamic and constantly evolving process shaped by experiences of migration, colonization and diaspora" (Hall, 2015, p. 395). His conceptual framework assists the researchers in understanding the process of identity creation and how this process is influenced and leads to social and cultural changes in the societies. Identity and heritage have long been central themes in diasporic literature, reflecting the struggles of individuals and communities navigating displacement, cultural memory, and assimilation.

One more critical element of the novel's engagement with identity and heritage is its depiction of intergenerational trauma. To understand some of the broader implications of this, we can look at the work of scholars like Marianne Hirsch (1997), who have written on the notion of post-memory, wherein the trauma survivors' descendants carry the emotional and

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psychological burden of events they did not themselves witness. Jeanette's desire to know her mother's Cuban past and Carmen's unwillingness to talk about it exemplify this dynamic in *Of Women and Salt*. Carmen's silence suggests an effort to repress painful memories, but her daughter's desire for connection shows how trauma lingers, despite efforts to wipe it away. The story of Maria Isabel, in 19th-century Cuba, also elaborates this theme. Her effort to learn to read, despite the ban by colonialists and subsequently by the patriarch, symbolizes resistance to both colonial oppression and the femme fatale complex. Her story is far away from Jeanette's both geographically and temporally, but it illustrates the way cultural and historical narratives shape identity across generations. As this piece of brilliant literary architecture makes clear, memory—individual and collective—is intrinsic to heritage, even when it is scattered or murky. Ultimately, *Of Women and Salt* (2021) is not just a novel about immigration; it is a novel about survival, memory, and the ways in which identity is shaped through both presence and absence. It asks the fundamental question that underpins all diasporic narratives: *Who are we, and where do we belong?* In the search for answers, Garcia presents a world where heritage is both an anchor and a weight—a legacy that is as much about loss as it is about resilience. To be more precise, this study tries to address the following research questions;

1. In what ways does Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory help explain the fluid and evolving nature of identity in the novel?
2. How does the novel portray the intersection of gender and diasporic identity, particularly in relation to the challenges faced by women in preserving cultural memory?

Literature Review

Heritage connects the past to the present while nurturing a cultural memory and instilling a sense of belonging within communities. However, according to Hall (1996) heritage cannot simply be understood as a fixed or inherited legacy; rather, it is perpetually reinterpreted and reconstructed in relation to changing social, political, and economic circumstances. The evolving nature of heritage is globally relevant, as those from diasporic and postcolonial contexts are constantly negotiating cultural roots while living in a completely different world. Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* argues that heritage is a selective interpretation of the past, shaped by present needs. Unlike history which aims for objectivity, "heritage is about memory, identity and emotional connection" (Lowenthal, 1985). Similarly, Solomon's analysis highlights the ways in which García Márquez's female characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* "embody the cyclical and mythical nature of time, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy" (Solomon, 1993, p. 195).

Hazel, Smith and Paul Stares brings out the dynamism that is involved in the diaspora issue. Their principal arguments are diasporas can: "be forces of peace and of war; at one and the same time" (Hazel, Smith & Stares, 2007, p. 9). As summarized by Bercovitch, it is suggested that "one may evaluate the possible roles that any diaspora may play by trying to think about the nature of conflicts in terms of the phases or stages of any conflict possible (emergence, continuation, escalation, termination, and post-conflict reconstruction)" (Smith & Stares, 2007, p. 26). Cohen argues that traditional notions of diaspora often rely on a nostalgic and idealized view of the homeland, which can be problematic and limiting (Cohen, 1995, p. 10).

Regarding identity of the blacks P. K. Nayar quotes Fanon in his work as: "When the colonial portrays the native as evil, pagan and primitive, given some time, the native ends up believing this standpoint was accurate, a prejudiced ethnic view. Thus, the native begins to think of himself as becoming evil, pagan and primitive. "The black man loses his self-identity

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because he can only see himself through the analytical view of the white man" (McWilliams, 2010).

Gareth Griffiths supports this by proclaiming that, "through the processes of colonization in the region the Caribbean natives have inherited the racial ideology of the colonizer" (Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p. 80). In *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai the writer focuses mainly on the Eastern region of India in the postcolonial period by presenting the aftereffects even when colonialism was ended. "Post-colonialism is considered on the investigation of the social tradition of colonialism and imperialism. It is a hypothesis and practice to produce history, culture, writing and discourse of European Imperial force. It centers on the human condition and abuse of colonized individuals and their territories" (Loomba, 2007, p. 15). "The different subjects were joined in the work, for example, social conflicts between two cultures, personality emergency, destitution, separation, social issue, racial segregation. There is a misfortune at all levels, individual, social, political and cultural" (Pushpa & Singh, p. 488). Similarly, Malik's (2019) work, *This Green and Pleasant Land*, offers a nuanced exploration of identity, community, and belonging, shedding light on the complexities of human experience.

In another study done by Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom (2006) tried to establish another statist of the concerned of diasporas in relation to the reoccurrence of conflict in the post conflict countries. Their conclusions are that "Indeed, based on the rather basic logic, one might assume that larger diasporas represent more severe conflicts which, should be characterized by greater risks of conflict reversion. The fraction of the population that perishes in periods of war is an increasing function of poverty and ethnic/religious fractionalization" (Collier, et al., 2006, p. 12). Thus, after a all the review, researcher has found that there is no relevant or direct research available on this novel regarding identity and heritage and diasporic study. It is a research gap that needs to be fulfilled.

Materials and Methods

Hall looked at the idea of Diaspora and ways in which it fits into cultures' configuration and specifically, migration and other forms of displacement. It recognizes that the identities are always complex and in the period of late modernity more and more pluralized, never integrated but always intersectionality constructed through, often contradictory, discourses, practices and vocations. "They are open to a process of radical historicization and are always under the process of change and transformation" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). These extremely shaped his understanding of language, representation and identity. "It is the same way with the black-white relation which brings together the two entities + white = being human of course. This is why in semiosis woman stands as mark against black or as a marked term against the unmarked terms of man and white" (Hall, 1996, p. 5).

Hall explained that culture is not something one is born with; it is not even something one can choose; culture is learned through the processes of cultural and socialization development. "Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not identity, or origins, as much as potential, recuperation and the conditions of possibility of a representation" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). He develops the way in which dominating cultural discourses affect and shape subjectivities of the oppressed groups. He concedes that due to globalization, there is always a noticeable imprint on how people and groups perceive their cultures.

Identity is therefore not as transparent or unproblematic as the concept is portrayed. Instead of identity as a production, which is never complete, bound and punctual, but always in the 'making' and 'unmaking' and always within and not beyond representation. This view complicates any conception of authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity' may refer. "The knowing self is partial in all its manifestations; it is never complete, fully

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formed, just there, and authentic; it is created and sutured incoherently and therefore can connect with another to co-see without having to become another" (Haraway, 1991, p. 193).

The structure of the novel itself reflects the shakiness of memory. Rather than a cohesive, linear narrative, *Of Women and Salt* explores fragmented perspectives across different moments and places. This underscores Hall's contention that identity is neither singular nor fixed but a negotiation process shaped by changing historical contexts. Telling her story involves allusions to 9/11, the implosion of the family patriarch and the subsequent struggle with addiction, which haven't offered Jeanette, as the narrator calls herself, any opportunities to ramada her past and understand her Cuban heritage, but no chance either to understand her roots and her very identity, paved as they are by fractured memories. Her path to self-discovery is in-line with Hall's idea that identity is not about retrieving some pure, singular origin but about working with multiple and often antithetical histories.

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents a cast of women who navigate displacement, trauma, and the weight of familial history in different ways. Garcia does not offer a singular definition of identity but instead allows each woman's experiences to shape their self-perception, emphasizing Stuart Hall's idea that identity is always in flux. Carmen, a Cuban immigrant, embodies the first-generation struggle to assimilate while repressing the past. She refuses to speak of Cuba, choosing instead to embrace an idealized version of American life. Her insistence on silence becomes a survival mechanism, yet it alienates her daughter, Jeanette, who longs to connect with her roots. Carmen's reluctance is evident when she says, "We are American. We leave the past behind" (Garcia, 2021, p. 45). Her words encapsulate the tension between remembering and forgetting that defines many immigrant experiences. Jeanette, in contrast, represents the second-generation's yearning for lost heritage. Unlike her mother, she is drawn to the past, seeking connection in ways that Carmen avoids. However, her struggle with addiction complicates her quest for identity. Her substance abuse can be seen as a manifestation of unresolved generational trauma—an attempt to fill the void left by unspoken histories. "Maybe she wasn't meant to know where she came from. Maybe some stories weren't hers to claim" (Garcia, 2021, p. 128). This internal conflict illustrates the challenges of identity formation within the diaspora.

Gloria introduces another layer to the novel's exploration of displacement. Unlike Carmen Gloria lives in constant fear of deportation, shaping her sense of self-worth and belonging. Her experience in detention is harrowing, "To be undocumented was to be invisible, to exist in the spaces between" (Garcia, 2021, p. 156). Her narrative challenges the traditional notion of the American Dream by revealing the brutal realities of immigration policies. María Isabel, Jeanette's distant ancestor from 19th-century Cuba, offers a historical perspective on women's resistance. Her defiance in learning to read in a male-dominated society marks her as an early symbol of empowerment. "We are force. We are more than we think we are" (Garcia, 2021, p. 12).

The Inheritance of Trauma and Cultural Displacement

Following Stuart Hall's cultural theory, we are reminded that identity is not something that is absolute but rather constructed through critiques and relations of power, leaving certain kinds of labor—namely the emotional and intellectual—unseen yet just as valuable in terms of labor value. "A person isn't idle because they are lost in thought," as Gabriela Garcia puts it in *Of Women and Salt*. There is labor that is visible and there is one that is invisible" (Garcia, 2021, p. 13). It makes the point that "labor" is not limited to physical work but includes cognitive and emotional labor, specifically in terms of cultural displacement, memory and transgenerational trauma. This type of unseen labor is common in immigrant and marginalized communities,

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where people negotiate, with themselves, their heritage, and the expectations of assimilation and resistance.

The novel's fragmented narrative structure mirrors its characters' fragmented identities as they struggle to reconcile their pasts with their present realities. We see this in Carmen's unwillingness to tell her daughter Jeanette stories about Cuba, a silence that represents the tension between remembering and forgetting. Carmen's refusal to recount her past demonstrates how diasporic identity is shaped as much by erasure as by remembrance: "Some things you decide are yours to carry. They are not for your children" (Garcia, 2021, p. 32). Besides, the novel presents history as something carried by women, passed down in both tangible and intangible ways. From María Isabel's experiences in 19th-century Cuba to Gloria's struggles as an undocumented immigrant, the female characters embody the endurance of history. Yet, this history is often fragmented or obscured, reinforcing Hall's assertion that identity is "not an essence but a positioning". In María Isabel's storyline, the act of reading becomes an act of resistance and self-preservation: "We are force. We are more than we think we are" (Garcia, 2021, p. 12). Her defiance in learning to read represents the power of self-definition, a theme that resonates across generations as her descendant's grapple with their place in the world.

Diaspora and Exile

This quote from novel speaks to diaspora, displacement and resilience; "Women of Cuba, I hear your cries. Fugitives, martyrs, widows, orphans You turn to an outlaw, and those who have no home of their own Seck the support of one who has lost his country. Of course we are overwhelmed; you no longer have your voice, I have more than my own: your voice moaning, my warning. And these two breaths, this weeping for home, calling for home, are all that is left. Who are we, weakness? No, we are force" (Garcia, 2021, p. 21). When the speaker mentions the "women of Cuba," she refers to an identity that encompasses the women who have suffered in exile, those who have suffered oppression, and those who have gone through historical upheaval. This captures then the image of technocratic displacement for the majority of the population, and polarization for the elite, and what will ensure solidarity if all they have is the image of "fugitives, martyrs, widows, orphans". And so now these women are displaced, homeless, looking for a comfort in an outlaw (presumably a man who is also an exile from his own country). "We are certainly overwhelmed; you no longer have your voice, and I have more than my own" drives home a profound sense of loss and burden. Summoned, the exile is a bearer of collective memory and struggle. The women themselves had been silenced, the speaker burdened with too many voices — and a resulting responsibility. The last portion, "These two breaths, sobbing for home, calling for home, is all that remains. Who are we, weakness? No, we are force." muddy the waters Bioclimate reaffirms the narrative resilience. (exiled and dispossessed), and that they are a potent force (not just victims) of memory, identity, and resistance. The process of mourning ("sobbing for home") and yearning ("calling for home") becomes a declaration of identity-- exile doesn't erase their heritage; it intensifies their connection to it.

This excerpt from the text captures the inner burden and the disintegration of the mother-daughter bond between Carmen and Jeanette; "Jeanette, how long are we going to be playing games like this? If you won't even tell me where you are, do you call just to break my heart even more? Only to make things more difficult for me?" (Garcia, 2021, p. 32). Carmen is a Cuban immigrant living in Miami, with whom you should connect. She struggles to connect with her daughter, Jeanette, who is struggling with addiction and detachment. The line "Jeanette, how much longer are you going to play games like this?" expresses Carmen's desperation and frustration about their broken relationship, as Jeanette isn't responding to the best mom in the world. The lines asking, "Call just to break my heart more? emphasizes

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Carmen's profound sense of loss and helplessness, as she seeks reconciliation but is rebuffed. The theme of generational disconnection and the impact of inherited trauma is one of the key themes in the novel, which is captured here. It also connects to the larger diasporic experience, as Carmen's immigrant history informs her always unrealistic expectations and fears and as Jeanette's struggles mirror a crisis of identity and belonging. Their simmering tension embodies the emotional complexity of lineage and the difficulties in continuing bonds forged from cultural disconnection and personal difficulty. And then I didn't know how to say, I want to know who I am, so I need to know the answer to who you've been. (Garcia, 2021, p. 39).

Further, in *Of Women and Salt*, Gabriela Garcia digs deep into the ironies of intergenerational trauma, regret, and reconciliation, often between mothers and their daughters. Such sentiment is powerfully expressed in the words, "How could I have hurt you so much? I regret. So much. That I would ever have laid a hand on you" (Marquez, 2021, p. 43). Carmen is Jeanette's Cuban mother, and she is learning how to live with the burden of her history. Carmen, having grown up in a culture that often equates discipline with love, inflicts the same harshness onto her daughter only to later see the deep wounds it creates. This moment of sorrow captures the theme of remorse and the generational cycle of suffering present in diasporic families and where past trauma is passed down instead of processed. Many of the novel's explorations of history and identity center on personal struggles—Carmen's rigidity is tempered by her upbringing and her own struggles with migrating, but this perspective is lost to Jeanette, raised in the United States, who sees it instead as a lack of love rather than a protective act. This quote embodies the hope for redemption and the inability to break the cycle of pain passed down from generation to generation, offering an insight into the deeper themes of the novel, including the struggle for identity, heritage and the emotional damage of being displaced.

The quotation, "That was the moment that shaped your life into disaster, or worse, I was the one who caused disaster" (Marquez, 2021, p. 83), emphasizes one of the major themes in *Of Women and Salt*, the significance of one's previous decisions playing a critical role in a person's identity spanning across generations. This line captures the burden of guilt and the weight of both personal and ancestral choices that mark the lives of Garcia's characters. The speaker's epiphany illustrates how one moment in time or decision can ripple down through generations, imprinting themselves on identities in irreversible ways. The quote hits home especially hard with Jeanette, a Cuban American who battles addiction and identity and her mother Carmen, weighed down by her own bad decisions. As a first-generation immigrant, Carmen has made decisions with the goal of protecting her daughter from the painful struggles she underwent, but these same decisions have pushed Jeanette away from her cultural heritage. It speaks to a reckoning moment, where one character admits to bringing pain not just on themselves, but on their mother, weaving the complexities of maternal relationships and how intergenerational trauma works into their manic search for a cure. When the speaker calls out, "I was the one who caused disaster", the speaker claims blame for the repercussions and the generational pain ultimately thrusts itself back on the diasporic family. This is in line with Garcia's more expansive investigation of how everything from personal to collective history informs the present. It also resonates with the broader diasporic experience of grappling with the past while trying to build a fresh identity in a new land.

In the end, this moment encapsulates the novel's overarching concern with memory, loss and the nuanced ways in which identity is affected by the choices of those we are and are not related to. The theme of trauma and its consequences and how trauma persists in one generation to the next is one of the focal points of the novel, and the passage of the character's emotional turmoil and unresolved sadness is clear in her passing thoughts. The excerpt— "The pervert, the sick man, the poor excuse for a human being, he who deserved a fate worse than

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liver failure. The heels of her shoes made a loud clacket of sound on the smooth pavement. My beautiful daughter. My beautiful, beautiful, lost daughter" (Marquez, 2021, p. 103)—this inner monologue belongs to Carmen, a Cuban immigrant mother dealing with the struggles of her daughter Jeanette, particularly her addiction and self-destructive tendencies. The mention of "the pervert" and "the sick sick man" is probably a nod to Jeanette's abusive father, whose absence has left a permanent wound on mother and daughter. Carmen's conflicting emotions—anger at the past, grief over her daughter's present—represent the weight of inherited trauma. Her repetition of the phrase "my beautiful, beautiful, lost daughter" emphasizes her helplessness and sense of grief, adding to the novel's exploration of how both personal and collective histories shape our identities. By framing this aspect through Carmen's narrative voice, Garcia highlights how unresolved trauma manifests past wounds in her bloodline, lending itself to this passage functioning as a heart-wrenching reflection of the novel's diasporic themes.

Identity Formation

A significant element of identity in *Of Women and Salt* is the craving for validation and belonging, something that women subjected to personal and cultural exile experience deeply. The line, "These men must want me more than anyone wants my mother, more than anyone wants the coolest girl in school. Then she felt good" (Garcia, 2021, p. 69), illustrates the internal barriers of Jeanette, one of the key protagonists, who are struggling to feel worthy and divert their culture in the shadow of their diaspora for their culture, family and belonging. Jeanette, the daughter of Carmen, a Cuban immigrant, is being raised in Miami, removed from both her Cubanness and a feeling of family warmth. Her own relationship with her mother is emotionally distant, so she looks for validation outside of it. Jeanette's subconscious comparison of herself to her mother, the line "These men must want me more than anyone wants my mother," implies that she believes desirability is what equates too worth. Carmen, who has survived personal and historical traumas, find it hard to express tenderness, leaving Jeanette hungry for some kind of recognition. Similarly, in mentioning "the coolest girl in school," Jeanette reveals a larger cultural influence—one in which self-esteem is dictated by outside approval instead of innate worth.

This moment mirrors the sense of fragmentation that many diasporic individuals, including Jeanette, experience in the novel. She conflates being wanted with 'being important,' a notion colored by her fraught relationship with her mother as well as the cultural expectations of femininity. Garcia's rendering of Jeanette's internal reproduction echoes a common thread found in diasporic literature: the fragile search for identity in the midst of fragmented histories and the ongoing disinheritance from cultural affiliation. A major theme of this novel is tension between material wealth vs emotional or cultural fulfillment, as highlighted by the quotation: "Although you have so little," she said, "you're so happy. You could teach the children in my country so much about what really matters in life" (Garcia, 2021, p. 84). This sentiment encapsulates the intricate entanglements of privilege, wealth, and satisfaction, exemplified by the characters in the novel. In this scene, an American woman watches the life of a Cuban family and details the pastimes of the individuals, her lights clearly turned on her material poverty in contrast to their apparent happiness. This moment crystallizes the novel's investigation of diasporic identity itself, not least in how ideas of wealth and fulfillment diverge in different cultural and national contexts. The woman's comment implies a degree of privilege and romanticism associated with struggle at odds with the lives of Cuban characters such as María Isabel, who experience political and economic hardship. The statement further emphasizes the theme of perception versus reality, as an outsider may perceive resilience and joy while those within the struggle persist and also suffer.

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The quotation also encapsulates what's more broadly a tension between privilege and displacement in the novel. The American woman does concede that the Cuban children could impart what's "really, truly important in life" to her children, but the perspective she's coming from is one of privilege that she is able to adopt and take on: By learning struggle in the end, it makes you buoyant — "less of the petty nonsense." In this way, Garcia critiques the desire to romanticize hardship while neglecting to demand institutional change to structural inequalities that create hardship. Eventually, this moment in this text serves as a microcosm of the themes of privilege, cultural contrast, and survival operating within diasporic communities. It points to the ways social class and cultural background influence how one understands joy and suffering, complicating how identity, class, and heritage interact in *Of Women and Salt*. This familial/political tension is one of the main themes of the text, and it gets played out in the marred relationships by exile and ideological divide. Not-Ana and Jeanette's exchange really brings this theme to the forefront — it shows that blood doesn't necessarily run thicker than political beliefs. Jeanette, a Cuban-American, was brought up without the ability to visit her ancestral homeland because of her mother Carmen's steadfast anti-communist beliefs, which prevent her from communicating with her grandmother in Cuba. Not-Ana (the daughter of Jeanette's neighbor Gloria) is a foil to this; she's been brought up with a heavy emphasis on the importance of family. This antithesis is made explicit in Not-Ana's comment: "My mom says you're not going to Cuba. You won't even talk to your own mother, for politics," Not-Ana said. "And she doesn't think it's very nice and she says family is what matters the most and she says thank God we know how much family matters and how much we should all be together and she..." (Garcia, 2021, p. 98). This statement adds to the idea of political ideologies ruining relationships between generations, especially in diasporic communities, where different experiences of exile and collective traumas inform personal identities and choices. While Carmen refuses to reconnect with Cuba for her own painful memories of exile, Not-Ana's words reveal another perspective through this moment—one that puts family relationships ahead of ideological divisions. By this means of exchange, Garcia demonstrates the complex relationship between identity, heritage, and political allegiance in diasporic families, highlighting the ways in which exile commonly throws individuals into conflict between their personal history and collective belonging.

One of the major themes in *Of Women and Salt* is identity and cultural dislocation; the back and forth between Jeanette and Carmen illustrates this perfectly. The discussion addresses the generational and cultural divides present within the Cuban-American immigrant experience. When Jeanette says, "I could have brought my Cafecito had I known there was a cup holder. she references Cuban culture with Cafecito, a Cubans identity and culture" (Garcia, 2021, p. 116). This comment subtly highlights her connection to her roots although she has spent her life in the United States. Carmen, her mother, responds instantly, with humor but also outrage: "Of course there's a cup holder. What do you think this is? Mars? We're not that backward" (Garcia, 2021, p. 116). It seems that Carmen's reaction suggests an understanding of stereotypes against immigrants for assuming to come from a place where people could be considered backward or inferior. Her speech also speaks of her desire to hold on to dignity and progressive values, despite the judgment she may face. The exchange here distills the more expansive theme of cultural negotiations, in which immigrant parents like Carmen seek to protect cultural roots while rejecting condescending stories, and their American-born children, like Jeanette, exist in their bicultural identity with informal ease and familiarity. In this short yet rich exchange, Garcia conveys the complexities of diasporic identity, in which heritage exists as simultaneously a source of pride and site of frisson. This is critical to the events that unfold in *Of Women and Salt*, as one of its central themes is of identity and perception of culture as it relates to the Cuban diaspora. We see this actually in the way Maydelis, the Cuban

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woman, talks about social groups based on their clothing and they sort of behavior. During a call with Jeanette, Maydelis does not hide her disdain for reparteros: "A repartero is a kind of person," she says, "that you can't try repaecita with them, because they don't work. "They dress like reggaeton stars. Well, they have no class, if you know what I mean. I can no longer find another word to say what they must have to mean: "They talk bad" (Garcia, 2021, p. 132). It is a comment that highlights one of the downfalls of subcultures of social hierarchies we have all learned in Cuban culture, where the way you speak, what you wear, and the company you keep can talk so much about who (at least that someone else) that you will be. Maydelis has a class-based prejudice that leads her to view reparteros as unrefined and disreputable. Her comments also highlight how cultural identity can be influenced by internalized prejudices, and these divisions can occur even among those who share a common heritage. In framing Garcia, presenting Maydelis as a 'policing' figure, Garcia critiques the ways' identity is policed both in diaspora, as well as in the homeland. Specifically, she underscores how 'cultural belonging' is fraught with exclusion and judgment.

Identity and Heritage

The characteristic theme of *Of Women and Salt* is to discover in buried histories and collective stories, and that is expressed in the sentence where Jeanette remembers: "Abuela found them in the walls of the house—twenty years ago, I'm talking about when she was expanding the house" (Garcia, 2021, p. 139). An important historical and metaphorical turn happens here, as the scene captures the silences, the metaphorical caves filled with bats, the agony at the center of so many identity-shaped silences within the book. The unveiling here is literal, but it can also be understood metaphorically, a way of revealing to the reader the kind of objects or remnants of the past, which had been effectively hidden inside the house, that are often buried right within the house these structures hold the trauma of everyone who has ever lived in them, and they don't forget. In this setting, the figure of Jeanette's mother, Carmen, becomes central as she tries to create a stable life in Miami while suppressing the struggles of her own Cuban past. Much like Jeanette, who also feels disconnected from her ancestry, which she wants to dig into only complicates things as much of the (familial) past goes unspoken. And in the case of Dolores, the grandmother, she represents an older generation that physically and metaphorically laid the groundwork for this life, but within that groundwork are all of the untold stories. The metaphor of "expanding the house" becomes a metaphor for exposing these hidden histories—indicating that in order to flourish, one must reckon with the past.

This quote highlights one of the novel's central themes of generational trauma, as well as the ways in which identity is constructed through both osmosis and conscious forgetting. It is when buried in the walls of something [that] the past can no longer be covered up; it is always coming back to haunt us. Through moments such as these, Garcia's novel underscores the tension between remembering and erasing history, as it makes clear that identity is inextricably linked to both the stories that are told and those that go unspoken. Heritage and the myriad tangible and intangible ways it is preserved and given new meaning and presence across generations is one of the book's major themes: This theme is beautifully realized in the symbolic weight of a book that has been handed down within the family. The quote, "It's a special book. One thing that had belonged to our family for years. A present from my great-grandmother. You know I had that thing hidden in the wall for years, how special that thing is? And now he took it" (Garcia, 2021, p. 142) highlighting how personal and historic the connection to the book is for the character. The relationship we have with this object, which is not just a book but a repository of family, history, and identity, is emotionally heavy. The concealment of it in the wall suggests a move to preserve and shelter this legacy, but its subsequent disappearance also reveals the fragility of that inheritance, and the relative instability of diasporic legacies. More broadly, the passage captures the plight faced by

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displaced individuals who attempt to cling to pieces of their cultural and familial histories while grappling with the forces that threaten to obliterate or co-opt them. It's at once a meditation on how the objects we keep become tangible connections to our origins, and how their absence can reflect the grander disruptions that diasporas encounter.

Jeanette and The Second-Generation Search for Identity

Jeanette, in contrast to her mother, is drawn to the past. Her addiction and self-destructive tendencies mirror her internal conflict: "Maybe she wasn't meant to know where she came from. Maybe some stories weren't hers to claim" (Garcia, 2021, p. 128). This internalized uncertainty reflects Hall's concept of identity as a continuous process of negotiation, rather than a stable inheritance. Jeanette is one of the most complex diasporic characters in the novel. Born to a Cuban immigrant mother, Carmen, she experiences a deep sense of disconnection from her heritage. Jeanette's struggle embodies the classic identity crisis of the second-generation immigrant, who often feels caught in a no man's land between two cultures—the one she inherited, and the one that raised her. Her problems with addiction are symbolic of her larger struggle with identity and loss. Her mother, who won't talk about their Cuban past, has a strained relationship with her. This mystery of her origins, drives her curiosity about her grandmother's life in Cuba. Jeanette later goes to Cuba and spends time with her grandmother, Dolores, to know her history. "I want to learn where I come from. But my mother says nothing about it, ever" (Garcia, 2021, p. 129).

This reflects Jeanette's frustration with her mother's silence regarding their Cuban heritage. Carmen, like many first-generation immigrants, believes assimilation is the key to survival and actively suppresses painful memories of the past. Further, "Maybe I could belong somewhere". Jeanette's desire to visit Cuba is driven by her need to feel a sense of belonging. She is caught between her American upbringing and her Cuban ancestry, never fully identifying with either. Hall argues that identity is a "production" rather than a fixed essence, shaped by historical and cultural forces. Jeanette's struggle exemplifies this, as she must construct her identity by piecing together fragmented histories and experiences.

Gloria's Statelessness and the Fragility of Identity

Gloria's experience as a Salvadoran immigrant detained in the U.S. highlights the precariousness of identity for the undocumented. Her struggle to define herself outside of legal and national definitions reinforces the instability of diasporic belonging. "To be undocumented was to be invisible, to exist in the spaces between" (Garcia, 2021, p. 156). Her narrative adds another layer to the diasporic experience, complicating the novel's exploration of identity by highlighting the intersection of race, class, and legal status. Ana and her mother, Gloria, represent a different kind of diasporic struggle—that of undocumented immigrants from Central America. Ana is rendered homeless when Gloria, a Salvadoran immigrant, is seized by ICE and then passes through a foster system that strips her of her own identity. Unlike Carmen and Jeanette, Ana's identity crisis is tied to her legal standing. She is torn from her mother who ends up shaping her perspective as an immigrant in America. Her story underscores the brutal reality of immigration policies and how displacement shatters identities. As, "I don't know if I'm ever going to see my mother again" (Garcia, 2021, p. 157). Ana's story here is not only one of cultural displacement, but one of literal separation, exploring the bitter realities of immigrant detention. I don't know where I belong anymore. This mirrors Jeanette's struggles but from another facet—where Jeanette's identity crisis is cultural, Ana's is also political and legal. In Ana's story, Hall's notion of identity as a fluid and disputed space is also apparent. Her identity conditioned by the legal frameworks that dictate whether she can belong (or not) and her struggle one for survival and recognition.

Conclusion

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Through the experience of diaspora, Garcia's *Of Women and Salt* deftly examined identity and heritage. Through its themes, characters and fragmented narrative structure, the novel mirrors Stuart Hall's theory of identity as fluid, contingent and historically situated. By contrasting characters such as Carmen and Jeanette and Gloria, Garcia shows how identity is at once an inheritance and a construction. In the end, the novel is not invested in a single definition of diasporic identity, but rather in a negotiation of the past and present. Clothing becomes a means of embracing or rejecting heritage as characters shed the expectations thrust upon them. As Jeanette grows up disconnected from the traditional clothing and culture her mother, Carmen, wishes to keep. Carmen wears elegant, classically feminine outfits that are a nod to her upper-crust Cuban upbringing. Jeanette, though, defies these expectations, rejecting her mother's look in favor of more Americanized, relaxed clothing. Further, language in novel is also a bridge and a barrier between generations. The novel also examines how these systemic forces erode immigrant identities, turning people into caricatures or stripping them of their humanity entirely. Besides, Garcia's novel is the depiction of diasporic communities. The novel vividly shows the hardships these communities face, from economic instability and legal insecurity to the psychological cost of uprootedness. Garcia highlights the fact that diasporic communities are not homogeneous, and face diverse and complex struggles that stem from their socio-economic status, legal standing and personal histories. However, what connects them is their common experience of being "othered" in a society that often sees them as foreigners. Moreover, culture, religious beliefs and spirituality are strong factors in helping to define the characters' identities. Conclusively, Garcia tells a deeply human story that recognizes the pain of exile, the resilience of culture and the layered nature of home. Ultimately, it happens to be a novel of the resilience of immigrant women and the enduring legacy of the past on the present.

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