

Negotiating Identity: The Impact of Cultural Displacement, Memory and Adaptation on Children in *Haiti is My Home*

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*"I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them."*

- Isaiah 42:16 NIV

ABSTRACT

This research analyzes "*Haiti Is My Home*" through the framework of Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory (1990), investigating the emotional and psychological impacts of displacement on children, the influence of memory and nostalgia in identity formation, and the varied approaches to adaptation within a novel environment. The narrative centers on Marie, a young girl who is uprooted from Haiti to Boston following a catastrophic earthquake, as she endeavors to acclimate to her new surroundings while her cousin Johanne fully embraces their altered circumstances. The findings indicate: **1)** The examination illustrates that displacement profoundly undermines Marie's sense of self. Her emotional and psychological distress is manifest in her struggle to reconcile her past in Haiti with her current reality in Boston, intensifying feelings of alienation and resistance to assimilation. Conversely, Johanne embodies the constructive potential of adaptation, exhibiting resilience and enthusiasm regarding their newfound situation. **2)** Memory and nostalgia are crucial in the formation of Marie's identity, as her recollections of Haiti offer comfort, yet simultaneously worsen her alienation from Boston. Sensory stimuli, such as the aroma of familiar cuisine, tether Marie to her past, complicating her adjustment to her new environment. **3)** The contrasting behaviors of Marie and Johanne underscore the varied ways in which individuals cope with displacement, illustrating that adaptation is shaped by both individual experiences and emotional connections to prior contexts. This suggests that cultural identity is constructed and shaped and continually redefined, especially in the context of displacement and migration. The narrative's exploration of the issue of cultural dislocation highlights that identity is not static but is continuously reshaped in response to emerging realities.

Keyword: *Children's literature, Cultural Displacement, Postcolonial Identity, Hybridity, Colonial Alienation*

INTRODUCTION

The effect of cultural displacement on identity is one of the critical issues in literary works, especially in narratives about migration and the emotional challenges faced by displaced individuals. In *Haiti Is My Home*,

the author explores the tension between displacement and adaptation through the experiences of Marie, a young girl forced to leave Haiti after a devastating earthquake. This tension is seen in her contrasting feelings about her homeland and the challenges of adjusting to life in Boston, while her cousin Johanne approaches adaptation more optimistically. Likewise, in reality, displaced children, including those impacted by the Syrian conflict, encounter emotional and psychological challenges as they adjust to unfamiliar surroundings, frequently separated from their families and homes. Save the Children (2023) highlights the severe impact of displacement on children, emphasizing the need for humanitarian support and protection, mirroring the experiences of characters like Marie.

Haiti Is My Home, written by Katherine Follett and illustrated by Gabhor Utomo, is part of the Learning A-Z shared reading collection, aimed at young readers. The book, designed for Level 3 readers with a word count of 833, serves both as a story and an educational tool, teaching verb inflections and language skills. Set against the backdrop of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the narrative explores the themes of loss, adaptation, and cultural displacement, reflecting the real-life struggles of immigrant children like Marie, who must adjust to life in a new environment after a disaster. The book targets early elementary readers, making complex themes of migration and resilience accessible through simple language. Beyond its educational purpose, the story fosters empathy and understanding of the emotional challenges of displacement, illustrating how children can adapt and find a new sense of belonging despite initial difficulties. In the story *Haiti Is My Home*, the author highlights the tension between displacement and adaptation through the experiences of Marie, a young girl who grapples with leaving Haiti following a devastating earthquake. This tension is embodied in her contrasting feelings about her homeland and the challenges of adapting to life in Boston. As the narrative unfolds, themes of cultural identity, nostalgia, and belonging are woven into Marie's experience, contrasted with her cousin Johanne's more optimistic approach to adaptation.

Upon examining the story, Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity framework is used for understanding the problems of identity in the context of displacement. Hall argues that "*cultural identity... is a matter of becoming as well as of being*" (Hall, 1990, p. 225), a notion that captures the evolving and fluid nature of identity as individuals confront new cultural environments. Marie's struggle to adapt in *Haiti Is My Home* reflects this ongoing process of transformation, where her past life in Haiti and her new experiences in Boston create a continuous negotiation of identity. This is particularly evident when Marie's sense of alienation in Boston is highlighted by her dislike of the city's dark, imposing buildings, as Hall explains that "*cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories*" (Hall, 1990, p. 225), highlighting how her connection to Haiti informs her perception of the present.

Children's literature, in this context, plays a pivotal role in addressing the emotional and psychological issues faced by young readers who may experience or empathize with themes of displacement. By depicting characters like Marie, children's literature helps young readers navigate their own identities in the face of unfamiliar environments and cultural shifts. As Maria Tatar (2009) points out, "*Children's stories have always*

served as a space for exploration, where the young reader can reflect on their own position within the world" (p. 7). Through stories like *Haiti Is My Home*, children are given the tools to explore concepts such as belonging, cultural identity, and adaptation in an accessible and relatable way. These narratives foster empathy, allowing readers to identify with displaced characters, thus promoting a deeper understanding of the emotional challenges associated with migration and adaptation.

The story also emphasizes the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping identity, as Marie’s memories of her homeland offer a sense of continuity and comfort amid the dislocation. For instance, the smell of stew reminds her of Port-au-Prince, serving as an anchor to her cultural identity and shared history with her family. As Hall notes, “*cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us... with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning*” (Hall, 1990, p. 223). Marie’s memories of Haiti provide her with a sense of belonging that helps mitigate the emotional challenges of displacement.

In this analysis, we will explore how *Haiti Is My Home* portrays the emotional and psychological effects of displacement on children, the role of memory and nostalgia in identity formation, and the contrasting perspectives of Marie and Johanne in their adaptation to a new environment. Furthermore, we will examine the significant role children’s literature plays in helping young readers understand and process the complex emotions surrounding cultural displacement. Through these lenses, the story reveals the complexities of negotiating identity in the face of cultural dislocation and offers a means of emotional navigation for its readers.

Binary Opposition

DISPLACEMENT	ADAPTATION
<p>Displacement is illustrated in <i>Haiti Is My Home</i>, by Marie’s difficulty in adjusting to her new life in Boston. She feels uprooted from her home in Haiti, where she had a deep connection to the culture, warmth, and vibrancy of her surroundings. Her negative perception of Boston, with its cold weather and serious atmosphere, highlights her emotional dislocation. Stuart Hall’s notion that “<i>Cultural identities are constantly undergoing transformation</i>” (Hall, 1990, p. 226) reflects Marie’s challenge in redefining her identity after being displaced from her familiar environment. Her resistance to her new surroundings shows her struggle to reconcile her past and present.</p>	<p>In contrast, Johanne represents adaptation, as she approaches their new life in Boston with optimism and acceptance. Unlike Marie, Johanne embraces the positive aspects of Boston, such as the safety, cleanliness, and opportunities. Hall’s concept of “<i>becoming</i>” (Hall, 1990, p. 225) reflects Johanne’s ability to integrate her experiences in Boston into her identity, seeing the move as an opportunity to learn and grow. Johanne’s adaptability highlights her resilience and willingness to position herself positively within a new cultural context, suggesting a forward-looking approach to life in a different environment.</p>

METHOD

Upon doing the analysis, this study adopted a qualitative approach to literary analysis, employing Stuart Hall’s (1990) *Cultural Identity* theory as the primary theoretical framework to examine how people negotiate their identities in response to cultural displacement and migration. It is applicable as it explores how individuals

reconstruct their self perception when they are uprooted from their cultural homeland and placed in a foreign context. The method involved a close reading of *Haiti Is My Home*, focusing on how the themes of cultural displacement and identity formation were explored through the characters and their experiences. Specifically, the analysis was centered on Marie's *emotional* and *psychological* struggles with *displacement*, and the contrasting *perspectives* between her and her cousin Johanne. The research was expected to show how the story portrays the emotional and psychological effects of displacement on children, role of memory and nostalgia for home play in shaping identity and the depiction of the story on contrasting responses to displacement.

By analyzing key moments in the text, supported by relevant quotations, the method allows for a thorough exploration of how the narrative reflects Hall's concept of cultural identity as a constantly evolving construct. Additionally, the study will examine binary oppositions such as *displacement* versus *adaptation*, as represented by the two main characters. This approach will facilitate an understanding of how identity is negotiated in response to migration and displacement, offering insights into broader themes of cultural adaptation in children's literature as well as its role in providing *character-based* learning to young readers.

DISCUSSION

1. Emotional and Psychological Impact of Displacement on Children in *Haiti Is My Home*

The illustration visually highlights Marie's emotional struggle with displacement. The scene shows Marie sitting on the floor, pulling off her wet boot with a frustrated expression, while her mother stands nearby with a concerned look, suggesting a lack of comfort in her current environment. The muted tones and the closed-up space of the apartment, with its dim lighting, emphasize the contrast with her likely memories of Haiti, which she would associate with open spaces, warmth, and vibrant colors. The dark, steep stairs mentioned in the text are also part of the setting, adding to the closed, suffocating feeling that Marie associates with Boston. Her body language, sitting on the floor with wet boots, mirrors her feelings of being out of place and overwhelmed by her new environment. This captures her emotional and psychological displacement.

Marie and Pierre climbed the stairs to their apartment. Marie hated the steep, dark stairs and the closed-up feeling of the heated rooms.

Mama kissed Marie's forehead. "Did you have a good day?" she asked.

"No," Marie frowned, yanking off her dripping boot. Marie hadn't had a good day since her family left Haiti.



In *Haiti Is My Home*, the emotional and psychological effects of displacement on children are explored primarily through the character of Marie, who struggles deeply after leaving her homeland. The quote, "*Marie hadn't had a good day since her family left Haiti*" (Follet, p. 6), describes her sense of emotional turmoil and inability to adjust to her new life in Boston. This reflects the profound loss and identity crisis that displaced children often experience, as they are torn from their familiar surroundings and forced into foreign environments. Hall asserted that "*cultural identity... is a matter of becoming as well as of being*" (Hall, 1990, p. 225), emphasizes that identity is constantly shaped by both past occurrences and present realities. Marie's

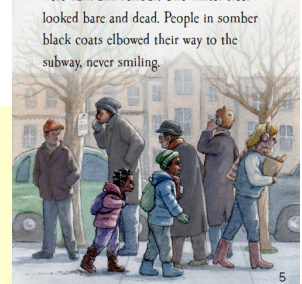
cultural identity, deeply rooted in Haiti, is challenged by the new and unfamiliar struggle context of Boston. Her inability to find joy or contentment since leaving Haiti highlights how her sense of self, tied to her homeland, is in conflict with the new environment. The emotional weight of displacement for children like Marie involves not just the physical act of leaving home but the ongoing psychological struggle to reconcile their past identity with their new, evolving reality. *“psychological acculturation involves a process where individuals experience stress and disorientation when adjusting to a new cultural environment, particularly when the differences between the original and new culture are significant”* (Berry, 1997, p. 12). Berry’s assertion on acculturation highlights the psychological stress that individuals like Marie experience when they are forced to adapt to a new culture that feels drastically different from their own. This aligns with Marie’s emotional turmoil, as she struggles to connect with Boston’s unfamiliar environment and faces feelings of dislocation. The stark contrast between Haiti and Boston intensifies her psychological discomfort, illustrating how cultural displacement often leads to stress and confusion in young individuals.

The visual elements in the illustration capture Marie’s emotional detachment and sense of alienation in Boston, as described in the text. The *“dark and serious”* brick buildings are shown in the background, with their dull and rigid appearance, symbolizing the cold and unwelcoming atmosphere that Marie perceives. The winter trees are bare, lifeless, and contribute to the bleakness of the environment, reinforcing her feeling that Boston is devoid of warmth or vitality, which contrasts with her memories of Haiti. The people in the image, dressed in somber black coats and walking with closed body language, appear to be moving briskly and without interaction, further emphasizing the isolation and impersonal nature of the city. Their serious expressions and the lack of eye contact with each other or with Marie visually reinforce her sense of being an outsider in this foreign environment. The illustration mirrors the text’s description of how alienating and cold Boston feels to Marie, highlighting the emotional and psychological impact of displacement as she struggles to find comfort in a place that feels so different from her home in Haiti.

In *Haiti Is My Home*, the emotional and psychological effects of displacement on children are vividly illustrated through Marie’s experience of alienation in Boston. The quote *“Marie hated Boston. The brick buildings were dark and serious”* (Follet, p. 5) symbolizes her deep discomfort and inability to connect with her new surroundings. The dark and imposing architecture of Boston contrasts with her memories of Haiti, which she associates with warmth and openness, reinforcing her sense of cultural dislocation. Stuart Hall’s assertion that *“cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation”* (Hall, 1990, p. 225) offers a perspective for understanding Marie’s struggle; Marie’s cultural identity is deeply tied to her past in Haiti, and she feels lost in the unfamiliar environment of Boston. This contrast between her rooted identity and her new reality leads to psychological discomfort. Erikson

Marie’s family left their home in Haiti, a country on an island in the Caribbean Sea, to come to Boston and stay with Papa’s uncle. They came because a terrible earthquake destroyed their entire neighborhood in Haiti.

Marie hated Boston. The brick buildings were dark and serious. The winter trees looked bare and dead. People in somber black coats elbowed their way to the subway, never smiling.



explained, *"In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity."* (Erikson, 1968, p. 130). This emphasizes that the disturbance of a person's established identity, like Marie's, can result in psychological discomfort when trying to adapt to a new environment that feels strange and detached from their previous experiences. Moreover, Hall argued that while cultural identity is always evolving, it is rooted in historical experiences and shared cultural codes, and the sudden shift from one cultural context to another leaves Marie feeling disconnected and unsettled. This illustrates the broader emotional impact of displacement on children, where the loss of familiar surroundings contributes to a profound sense of alienation and struggle to adapt. In terms of children's literature, this illustrated story *'Haiti Is My Home'* plays an important role in shaping their identity from a young age. *"Children's stories have always served as a space for exploration, where the young reader can reflect on their own position within the world"* (Tatar, 2009, p. 7). Tatar points up on how children's literature creates a platform for self-reflection, enabling young readers to learn and explore their identity, emotions, and place in the world through experiences depicted in the story.

2. The Role of Memory and Nostalgia in Shaping Identity in *Haiti Is My Home*

The illustration visually captures Marie's nostalgic memories of her homeland, *Port-au-Prince*, and how these memories influence her sense of identity and perception of Boston. The scene is bright, warm, and vibrant, with colorful storefronts and flowers spilling out of windows, symbolizing the liveliness and warmth that Marie associates with her home in Haiti. The open marketplace, characterized by vibrant productive and high spirited individuals, depicts the sense of community and intimacy that Marie yearns to experience. These visual features stand in high contrast to her sentiments regarding Boston, which she regards as frigid, dim, and inhospitable. The depiction of *Port-au-Prince* shows the joy and warmth of her memories, thereby reinforcing her emotional connection to Haiti. Such affirmative recollections play a crucial role in shaping her identity, complicating her ability to adapt to Boston, as the bustling, animated streets of *Port-au-Prince* are in strong opposition to the dreary and melancholic tone she encounters in her new urban setting. This sense of nostalgia creates a divide between her established identity in Haiti and the alienated reality of Boston, exacerbating her feelings of alienation. *"Nostalgia, especially in relation to migration, functions as a psychological tool that aids in preserving one's identity; however, it may also generate friction between historical and contemporary experiences, thereby complicating the process of adaptation"* (Boym, 2001, p. 25). Boym's analysis of nostalgia offers valuable understanding into how Marie's memories of Haiti offer her a sense of continuity with her past but simultaneously make it harder for her to embrace her new life in Boston. While the comforting smells and memories of *Port-au-Prince* help her hold on to her cultural identity, they also heighten the contrast between

Chapter 2: Someone Who Will Understand

The smell of flavorful stew made things better. It reminded Marie of the smells of Port-au-Prince, the city that was her home in Haiti.

It was always warm there, and the storefronts were wide open. People sold delicious food on the street. Colorful flowers spilled out of every window.

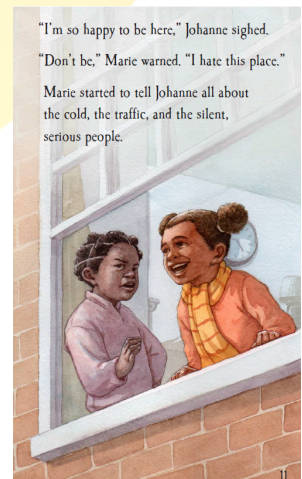


her familiar past and the alien present. This strain complicates her process of adaptation, as Marie struggles to harmonize the affection of her recollections with the harshness of her new setting.

Memory and nostalgia play a crucial role in shaping Marie's identity and her perception of Boston. The memories of Haiti, symbolized by sensory experiences such as the "*smell of flavorful stew*" (Follet, p. 7), serve as a comforting link to her homeland. This smell evokes positive memories of her life in *Port-au-Prince*, offering her emotional solace in an unfamiliar environment. Stuart Hall suggested that cultural identities are grounded in "*common historical experiences and shared cultural codes*" (Hall, 1990, p. 223), which provide a stable framework of meaning for individuals. For Marie, her memories of Haiti are foundational to her sense of self, helping her maintain continuity with her past even as she struggles to adapt to her new life in Boston. Additionally, Marie's nostalgia for the past is evident in her comparison between her brother Claude's life in Haiti, where they played soccer every afternoon, and his life in Boston, where he now works late into the evening. This comparison underscores her longing for the lost simplicity and joy of her former life. Hall's notion that "*the past continues to speak to us*" but is no longer a simple or factual representation of that past (Hall, 1990, p. 226) reflects Marie's evolving identity. Her memories are not static; they influence her present perception of Boston, intensifying her feeling of dislocation. The tension between her nostalgic memories and the reality of her new environment illustrates the problematic issue of her identity as it transitions between two cultures. The past informs her sense of self, but it is also constantly in flux, as she experiences the emotional and psychological effects of displacement. In the context of children's literature, children tend to learn, imitate or mimic their surroundings, including cultural learning in their society. "*Children's literature is one of the primary ways societies transmit their cultural values to the next generation*" (Nodelman, 2008, p. 12). Nodelman highlights how children's books play a crucial role in passing down cultural values and norms, helping young readers understand their cultural identity.

3. Adaptation Strategies in *Haiti Is My Home*: Marie and Johanne's Perspectives

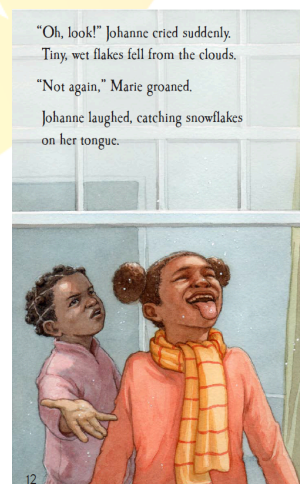
The illustrations vividly capture the contrasting perspectives of Marie and Johanne as they adapt to their new environment. In the first image, Johanne is seen smiling and expressing joy as she leans out the window, excited by the experience of snowflakes, symbolizing her positive and open attitude toward adapting to Boston. Her wide smile, bright orange scarf, and energetic body language reflect her enthusiasm and willingness to embrace new experiences. In contrast, Marie appears frustrated, her face tense as she warns Johanne, "*Don't be. I hate this place*" (Follet, p. 11) Marie's body language, crossed arms and a frown, emphasizes her resistance to the new environment, showing her reluctance to embrace Boston. The muted color tones of her clothing and the rigid posture further highlight her discomfort and emotional distance from the new surroundings. "*Resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt successfully in the face of*



adversity, plays a crucial role in how individuals navigate displacement and cultural change" (Masten, 2001, p. 228). Masten's concept of resilience clarifies Johanne's ability to adapt to Boston with enthusiasm and optimism. Unlike Marie, Johanne embodies resilience by viewing the new environment not as a loss, but as an opportunity for growth. Her willingness to embrace the unfamiliar (as seen in her excitement about snow) reflects her capacity to adapt positively to adversity. In contrast, Marie's resistance shows a lack of this resilience, as she remains emotionally tied to her past life in Haiti, making it difficult for her to embrace change. Furthermore, the portrayal of the characters in children's stories can be amusing but at the same time, children can learn morals that will sharpen their analytical thinking that eventually helps promote social awareness. *"The importance of children's literature extends beyond mere amusement; it encompasses its capacity to cultivate social consciousness and analytical reasoning in developing minds"* (Zipes, 2009, p. 15). Zipes emphasizes the bifunctional nature of children's literature in simultaneously offering enjoyment and inspiring young readers to enhance their social consciousness and critical thinking abilities.

In the second illustration, the differences are even more seen. Johanne continues to enjoy the snowfall, laughing and catching snowflakes on her tongue, symbolizing her excitement about the new environment. Meanwhile, Marie's expression remains one of displeasure, as she gestures toward Johanne, clearly unenthusiastic about the experience. The playful joy seen in Johanne's face contrasts sharply with Marie's grumpy demeanor, visually emphasizing their different emotional responses to adapting to Boston. Together, these illustrations illustrate the different ways the girls react to displacement: Johanne with positivity and excitement, and Marie with reluctance and resistance. This contrast in their perspectives helps to visually reinforce the theme of adaptation to new environments, as Johanne embraces change while Marie struggles to let go of her connection to her past life in Haiti. *"Literature for children is a key element in the development of moral reasoning, helping children distinguish right from wrong and explore ethical dilemmas in a safe context"* (Lurie, 2003, p. 9). Lurie emphasizes the significant moral and ethical teachings present in children's literature, which assist young readers in cultivating more concept learning of morality.

In *Haiti Is My Home*, the contrasting perspectives of Marie and Johanne in their adaptation to a new environment are portrayed through their different reactions to Boston. Johanne's excitement is evident in the quote, *"I'm so happy to be here,"* (Follet, p. 11) *"Johanne laughed, catching snowflakes on her tongue"* (Follet, p. 12), which reflects her positive outlook and openness to adapting to her new surroundings. Stuart Hall's theory supports this by explaining that *"cultural identities are the points of identification... not an essence but a positioning"* (Hall, 1990, p. 226). Johanne's willingness to embrace new experiences, like catching snowflakes, shows that her identity is not fixed but shaped by her positive attitude towards Boston, allowing her to position herself in a way that helps her adjust more easily to the new cultural context.



On the other hand, Marie's resistance to Boston is clear in her warning to Johanne: "*Don't be, Marie warned. I hate this place.*" (Follet, p. 11). Marie's negative perception of Boston reflects her deep emotional attachment to her past life in Haiti and her struggle to adapt to the new environment. Hall's concept of diasporic identity, which "*constantly produces and reproduces itself anew, through transformation and difference*" (Hall, 1990, p. 235), highlights Marie's ongoing identity conflict. While Johanne embraces the changes, Marie remains firmly rooted in her memories of Haiti, finding it difficult to transform and adapt. This tension between her sense of self in Haiti and the reality of living in Boston prevents her from fully engaging with her new environment, showing how displacement can affect identity in different ways for individuals.

CONCLUSION

In *Haiti Is My Home*, the narrative explores the emotional and psychological effects of displacement on children, the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping identity, and the contrasting perspectives of adaptation through the characters of Marie and Johanne. Utilizing Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity theory as a framework, the story shows how displacement unsettles Marie's sense of identity, making it difficult for her to balance her past life in Haiti with her present in Boston. Marie's emotional struggle is clear in her failure to connect with her new environment, leading to feelings of alienation and discomfort as she resists embracing her new reality.

The role of memory and nostalgia is a crucial aspect of Marie's identity, with sensory experiences like the smell of stew serving as emotional anchors to her homeland. These memories provide her with comfort but also intensify her feelings of displacement, as the warmth of her past in Haiti contrasts sharply with the cold, serious atmosphere of Boston. It suggests that while cultural identities are rooted in the past, they are continuously evolving, yet Marie's inability to let go of her memories makes it difficult for her to adapt.

In contrast, Johanne's adaptability is reflected in her positive outlook and willingness to embrace new experiences, such as her excitement about snow. Hall's notion of identity as fluid and shaped by positioning within new environments is illustrated through Johanne's acceptance of Boston and her view of it as an opportunity to grow. This adaptability highlights the psychological resilience that some individuals may display in response to displacement.

Emphasizing the problematic issue of cultural identity in the context of displacement, Johanne represents the possibility of growth and adaptation, Marie embodies the emotional struggle that can accompany such transitions. The contrasting responses to displacement in the story show how past experiences, memories, and individual perspectives shape the ability to adapt to new cultural environments. This analysis demonstrates that identity is not static but constantly negotiated in the face of changing realities, particularly for children facing the psychological and emotional impacts of migration and displacement.

As part of children's literature, the illustrated storybook *Haiti Is My Home* offers several character-based learning lessons. The story teaches *resilience* through Johanne's optimistic adaptation to her new life in Boston, showing the importance of perseverance. It fosters *empathy* by allowing readers to

understand the emotional struggles of displacement, encouraging kindness towards those in similar situations. *Adaptability* is highlighted by contrasting Johanne's openness with Marie's resistance, emphasizing the value of embracing change. The story also explores *cultural identity*, demonstrating the importance of honoring one's roots while being open to transformation that eventually emphasizes the need for *emotional expression and support* during times of change.

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