

YELLOW OUTSIDE, WHITE INSIDE: NEGOTIATING RACHEL CHU'S IDENTITY IN JON M. CHU'S *CRAZY RICH ASIANS*

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Abstract

Crazy Rich Asians (2018), a film by Jon M. Chu is one of many films that raise this topic as the main theme of the story. This film tells about the life of a Chinese American woman, first generation, who was born and grew up in New York, the United States. This research is intended to elaborate how this movie portrays Rachel's identity as a form of negotiation and why Rachel's identity becomes problematic only when she met Nick's family. By conducting descriptive qualitative method, this research uses only some dialogues and narration taken from *Crazy Rich Asians* film script as the source of data. Since the intention of this research is to analyze the identity negotiation between two cultures, therefore this research is conducted under postcolonial theory. The result of the study shows that although Rachel still hold on the Chinese culture as her ancestor's culture, it turns out that American values has influenced her a lot in making decision. It leads to her conflict with Nick's mother since Eleanor hold on Chinese traditional cultures. This research concludes that negotiation showed by Rachel in the movie is needed to do in order to be accepted by both of the cultures although it still leads to some conflict.

Keywords: *conflict, culture, identity, negotiation, postcolonial*

Introduction

Identity is a topic that never end. As it is stated by Hall, identity is a production that never has an ending and it is always in process in the form of representation (1990, p. 222). This quotation can be interpreted that identity is fluid and always changes. If it is related to populer culture, it depends on who made the representation or for whom the representation was made. Therefore, it is always interesting to discuss about identity. In regard to identity in popular culture, it cannot be separated from the meaning of popular culture. One of them is stated as follows:

Popular culture is one of the principal sites where these divisions are established and contested; that is, popular culture is an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate groups (Storey, 2003, p. 51).

In this quotation, it can be seen that popular culture becomes an arena of struggles and negotiation, one of them through the representation of identity. Through popular culture, the interest of dominants groups and subordinate groups can also be seen through the representation of identity. Film as one of the product of popular culture can also be seen as a site of identity contestation and negotiation.

One of the films that shows identity negotiation is *Crazy Rich Asians* by Jon M. Chu (Chu, 2018). The film tells about the life of an Asian-American woman, who has to live in two worlds, China as her ancestors homeland and America as her birth place and grow. The

film represents Rachel's double identity as an Asian-American contrasted with the Asian-Asian woman identity portrayed by Nick's family. This topic becomes very interesting to be discussed since they actually come from the same culture, but because they live in different worlds, this film represents them differently. This research concerns on the identity negotiation that portrayed through Rachel's characterization. It is also intended to analyze Rachel's identity and its relation to the conflict happens between her and Nick's mother. In order to get the answer of this research, it is needed to use Edward Said's idea on immigrants' identity which is written in his article entitled *Between Worlds* (1998). In this article, Said compares his experience of being an immigrant not only in Egypt but also in the United States with some other people experiences. Therefore, in this article, he underlines the greatly influences of living in two worlds, homeland and hometown.

In relation to the sources of data, there have been several researches that has been conducted. The first research focuses on identity of immigrants and their representation as a design for western audiences (Eckhardt & Kerrigan, 2019). The second research is about the cultural identity of Asian-American and the conflict appears in the story (Arsi & Sobur, 2019). While the last research concerns on Rachel's identity seen from the interplay of Eastern and Western (Wiraldy & Ginting, 2021). However, this current research paper is different from these previous studies from several points. Although the previous studies also concern on identity, it is different from this current research paper since this research paper concentrates only on the negotiation of Rachel's identity for being an Asian-American. Besides that, this research paper also applies different kind of theory from the previous studies. While those previous studies use reception and semiotic, this research paper applies postcolonial theory, specifically Edward Said's idea that concerns on identity negotiation to explain Rachel's identity negotiation for living in America.

Method

This research paper is conducted under a descriptive qualitative method. As it has been stated by Bogdan and Biklen, a qualitative research should deal with a natural setting, descriptive, giving emphasize on the process rather than the result, inductive, and interpretative (1992, pp. 29–32). Qualitative method can also be used to analyse social phenomena in the society by doing interpretation and critics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). This research uses a film *Crazy Rich Asians* as the primary source and some articles, other films and books as the secondary source. The data of this research were dialogue and narration from film script. Data were collected, as Creswell (2007) stated, first by close reading the source of data to find the data that are related with the topic of the research. Secondly, the data were categorized and displayed based on the topic of the research (Creswell, 2007, pp. 276–284). The data were analyzed under post-colonial framework which is related to the Edward Said's thought in his writing "Between worlds" (Edward Said, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

In-between Identity as a Form of Identity Negotiation

After conducting data analysis, it is found that there are some data from the film that show Rachel Chu's identity as an in-between identity. It can be said that she is not white enough to be an American, but she is not yellow enough to be called as Asian. Rachel's in-between-ness can be seen not only from physical condition, but also from her way of thinking and behaving. As a first generation of Asian-American descendant, it cannot be denied that Rachel physically can be included into Asian descendant, since she has a yellow skin and

slanted eyes as the dominant characteristics of Asian people. But that becomes the only things about her that can be directly related to Asian characteristics. This current research found that Rachel shows a new identity as Asian-American which lays in between position as a form of negotiation between her homeland culture and hometown culture. Her name directly shows the combination of the two worlds. Rachel is a typical name for American girls which is derived from Hebrew meaning an ewe. Meanwhile, Chu is taken from Chinese culture which is commonly given to girls. Both of the words represents the two worlds which are related to Rachel's live.

This film shows that as a descendant of Asian culture, Rachel has lost her relation with her homeland and also language. In this film, Rachel is portrayed to have perfect English instead of broken English as what have usually attached to Asian characters. On the other hands, she has a very limited knowledge on Chinese language. Although the use of Chinese language in Rachel's family actually can be seen through Kerry, Rachel's mother. She is the one who tries to keep attaching Rachel with their homeland culture. One of it by using chinese language.

Kerry: you were grew up here. (in Mandarin; subtitled) Ni kan qilai shi huaren, ni jiang de shi zhongwen. Keshi zheli he zheli... [Your face is Chinese. You speak Chinese. But here... (points to Rachel's head and mouth) ... and here... (in English) You're different. But wearing a lucky color will make a good first impression (Chu, 2018).

The quotation above shows that Kerry uses two language interchangeably as a way to keep them attached to their homeland culture. From this quotation, it can be also seen that Kerry is aware on Rachel's in-between identity. It can be seen from the words "*your face is chinese, you speak chinese...but here (points to Rachel's head and mouth) and here...you're different*". The word different here represents Rachel's position which is in the middle between Asian and American. Rachel's ability in speaking Chinese is not as good as when she has to speak in English. It can be seen from scenes when she has to have a conversation with Nick's family, especially Nick's grandmother. She has to be very careful in pronouncing the words in Chinese in order not to make mistake. It is understandable since she practices English more often then the Chinese.

Besides the language, this film also shows Rachel's distance with her homeland that can be seen from her way of thinking. It is stated on the previous quotation, when Kerry points her finger to Rachel's head. It means that Rachel has to aware that she may differ from the Asian-Asian because growing in the United States, it is cannot be denied that Rachel is greatly influenced by American values. For example, there is one scene that shows Rachel's high appreciation on privacy when she suggests Nick to order himself a slice of cake when he insists to share her cake with him. She said "*You know what, you can order your own*" (Chu, 2018). It shows that she is actually annoyed with Nick's habit on eating her meals. In this film, it is also portrayed that Rachel is quite proud of her achievement which cannot be separated from her mother's roles. She believes on hardwork and also freedom of deciding what is best for her. By doing hardwork, she can be succed on being a lecturer in one of a very prestigious universities in New york. Her mother, Kerry supports her in every step of her decision. This part extremely shows that Rachel and her mother is greatly influence with American values of hardwork and also freedom.

Rachel's awareness on the problem of her in-between identity

This current research finds that being an Asian-American, Rachel Chu does not realize that she has acquired an in-between identity as the result of her belongingness on two worlds, her homeland and her hometown. As she said "*How are they different? They are Chinese..I*

am Chinese...I am so Chinese" (Chu, 2018). From the quotation, it can be seen that Rachel confidently believes that she is just the same as other Chinese anywhere they are. She believes that her physical appearances is something which cannot be denied as her reason to be included into Asian. She never thinks that her in-between identity will become a problem for her prior to her coming to Singapore and seeing Nick's family. She realizes that she has problem with her identity only when she starts to have conflict with Nick's mother, Eleanor. There are some scenes that made her realize that she is different from the Asian-Asian. the first scene is when she meets Eleanor for the first time. Her proudness on her hardwork and achievement is not responded positively by Eleanor. As Eleanor said "*How American. Well, your mother is very open-minded, not like here, where parents are obsessed with shaping the life of their children*"(Chu, 2018). This scene becomes the starting point of Rachel awareness on her in-between identity that can be a problem for her. What she has already believes for many years to be a right thing suddenly seen as a wrong thing by others. Eleanor also said directly that because of Rachel has been grown in America, she becomes a stranger, that is why she cannot be accepted as part of her family. It can be seen from the following quotation:

ELEANOR There's a Hokkien phrase. Ka gi lan. It means 'our own kind of people.' And you're not our own kind. RACHEL 'Cause I'm not rich? 'Cause I didn't go to a British boarding school or I wasn't born into a wealthy family? ELEANOR You're a foreigner. American. And all Americans think about is their own happiness. (Chu, 2018).

This quotation shows the point when Rachel is forced to realize that her in-between identity brings her a problem with her boyfriend's family. It is not enough to only have the same physical appearance, it is greatly influenced by how you are thinking and behaving. It can be seen from the words "all Americans think about is their own happiness". Here, Eleanor's perception of Americans is negative. Rachel who were born and growth in America is seen as the product of American culture, no matter what is her ancestor's history. Therefore, it is hard for Rachel to be accepted by Eleanor, since she has a negative thought on Americans in general.

Discussion

The findings of this research shows that it is in line with what has been stated by Said that the first thing to acknowledge is the loss of home and language in the new setting (1998), that is also can be seen in Rachel characterization. In-between identity that portrayed through Rachel's characterization can be seen through the use of language and also her way of thinking that differ from the people of her homeland. "Flanked between two homelands, two languages, two cultures, and two worldviews, immigrants find it hard to articulate in clear, unambiguous terms the broad lines tracing the contours of their identity" (Safoui & Bejjit, 2019, p. 22). This quotation explain why Rachel can have an in-between identity. It is stated that being in between two worlds, two cultures or two worldviews, as one of immigrants, it is normal that Rachel finds difficulty in constructing her identity clearly. Since she has two worlds that greatly influences her life, she cannot be separated from both of the world. As one of the core issues of Said's essay is about feeling of belongingness, it can be seen that someone who straddling between two worlds is not able to nurture any feelings of belongingness to any one in particular (Safoui & Bejjit, 2019, p. 22). It also happens to Rachel, as she has to straddle between two worlds, America as the culture in which she grows up and China as her ancestor's culture. It is hard for her to build her sense of belonging in her condition.

In relation to the previous discussion, Rachel in-between identity does not only brings effect to Rachel's sense of belongingness, but it also gives impact toward other acceptance for her existence. This movie shows that as immigrants, Asian-Americans cannot be easily accepted either by the Americans or the Asians, because they are standing in-between both of the worlds. At the end, Rachel finds that her in-between identity leads her to have a conflict with Nick's mother. Having greatly influenced by American values and culture, Rachel is considered to be not good enough for Nick's family. She has to experience refusal from Nick's family, especially his mother, Eleanor. The different perception on American culture becomes the basic reason on this conflict. Although physically Rachel can be regarded as an Asian, but culturally, Rachel has to live in two worlds, Asia and America. That what makes her an Asian-American.

This current research's finding differs from what have already been resulted from the previous studies that has been mentioned in the introduction. Although the previous researches also talk identity and conflict in the film, but this current research differs in the theory applied and also findings. Eckchart and Finola uses postcolonial framework in general to analyze the immigration model and conflict appears in the film. The findings are there is a new model of immigration critique of American ideals and values and also representation of east-Asianness that is designed to appeal to western audience (2019). Arsi and Sobur (2019) analyse Rachel's identity conflict using six actants of Greimas and Metz's semiotic while Wiraldy and Ginting (2021) uses Pragmatic to examine Rachel's identity. While this current research uses Edward Said's article to analyse Rachel in-between-ness and finds that as a problem that leads to her conflict with Nick's mother.

Conclusion

Based on the previous discussion, it can be concluded that living as an immigrant in the United States, one can have an in-between identity that shows the influence of both worlds they are living in. Those are their homeland and their hometown. It is found that it is hard for them to be accepted as the member of both culture since there are part of each culture that influence them. Therefore, immigrants will always stand in between both of the worlds. It confirms Said's idea that it is hard for those who live in two worlds to construct their identity clearly. This research also finds that this in-between-ness will always lead to a conflict between member of the culture since they are hardly accepted by both of the cultures.

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