

CULTURAL CONFLICT EXPERIENCED BY THE CENTRAL CHARACTER IN THE NOVEL *CRAZY RICH ASIAN* BY KEVIN KWAN

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ABSTRACT

Cultural conflict can occur because the diversity of cultures, religions, and races. When we refuse to learn about other cultures, stereotype, misinterpretation and tendency to change attitudes toward other ethnicity might happen. The purposes of this thesis is to explore the cultural conflict and the settlement in Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asian*. This novel presents Rachel Chu and Nicholas Young as the central character. The research is conducted by means of descriptive analysis method. The results shows that the cultural conflicts experienced by Rachel and Nick were caused by stereotypes, misunderstandings, ethnocentrism and materialism, a high sense of selfishness that made the conflict continue without any resolution.

Keywords: Crazy Rich Asian; Cultural Conflict; Culture.

I. BACKGROUND

Humans and culture are bonds that can not be separated. Culture is created from daily activities and is conserved by generations. Culture in general is a method for living and developing which is shared in a group of people that will then be passed on from one generation to the other. Culture will be formed from a number of complex elements which consist of religious systems, politics, language, customs, tools, buildings, clothing, and also works of art. According to Hofstede (2002) culture is considered as one's way of thinking formed to distinguish the background of one group and another group

With a variety of ethnicities, cultures, religions, races and groups, a variety of social problems and conflicts are more likely to arise easily. Ross (1997) states that culture is an aspect that influences conflict and plays a vital role in most conflicts. However, despite the fact that culture influences conflict, conflict is not created because of culture; both are interrelated in a certain way (Avruch, 2000). Lack of knowledge of the

differences that exist between people from diverse cultures also causes clashes (Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006).

When we refuse to understand how other cultures work, a misunderstanding, bad prejudice and a tendency to have attitudes towards other ethnicities arise. In fact, internal conflicts can still occur between thnic groups. issues on social and cultural conflicts are raised in a large number of novels, one of which is in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asian* (2013). This novel is basically a love story between two central caharacters, Rachel Chu and Nicholas Young. Nick intends to propose to Rachel in his hometown of Singapore, but his extended family cannot accept Rachel because of differences in background. Nick grew up surrounded by a large family that still adheres to traditional customs. Nick was born to a Young family, Young is a familiar name in Singapore socialites. Being accustomed to elite lifestyles, Nick's family tends to see a person's value from materials. According to Richins & Dawson (1992) such thinking is called materialism; defining the perspective of someone in evaluating other individuals that tends to see someone's value from how much

material they have. Although Rachel grew up with the influence of American culture, her mother continued to teach her Chinese culture. The influence of the environment where she live greatly shaped the mindset and the way of her behaving. This difference however, triggers further conflicts, which proves that internal conflicts can still occur between ethnic groups.

The present authors are interested in examining the cultural conflict experienced by the central character in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asian* (2013) because of the differences in social and cultural backgrounds between the two highly complex characters and wether or not such complicated conflicts can be resolved. Although the outline of the story is ordinary about a love story between lovers whose relationship are not blessed, this novel broadly explains the culture, history, characteristics and kinds of Chinese people.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study is a qualitative research supported by descriptive analysis method. Nazir (2014: 63) explains that the descriptive method is used in examining the status of a group of people, an object, a set of conditions, a system of thought or a class of events at the present time. The presentation of the elements that support the occurrence of problems in the central character describe the matters relating to the central character based on the data in the story.

Library research techniques are applied to support the process of analysis by using primary data, which is the novel *Crazy Rich Asian* and secondary data derived from theoretical books, scientific journals and online articles related to the focus of this study, particularly cultural conflict.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the novel *Crazy Rich Asian* written by Kevin Kwan, Rachel and Nick become the central characters because they have the most quantity and appearance in conflicting stories. Based on her physiological dimensions, Rachel Chu is described as a 29-year-old

girl, "*Being twenty-nine, she was by Chinese standards well into the old-maid territory.*" (Kwan, 2013: 23) This quote is taken from the perspective of a Chinese, 29 years old and still unmarried is considered an old maid, her life is considered unlucky. Based on the viewpoint of Rachel's family, a woman who is self-financing, achieving a good career, highly educated is an achievement. Married or not is not a perfect benchmark of happy woman. Everything about her-from the dewy-just-back from a morning run on the beach complexion to the obsidian-black hair that stops just short of her collarbone-conveyed a natural, uncomplicated beauty. (Kwan, 2013: 35)

While Nicholas Young or Nick, based on physiological dimensions is described as a 32-year-old man, "*You're thirty-two, and up until now you have never brought anyone home. This is major ". Nicholas Young is described as having a very handsome face, perfect matted black hair, and having unusually dense eyelashes. "Normally Rachel found Nick's Britishy phrases so charming, but in this instance it was frustrating"* (Kwan 2013: 35).

Through this quote, Nick is described as having a British accent. From a sociological point of view Nick is a mere puppet, of Chinese descent but born and raised in Singapore. Nick was born to a very large and very well-off family, his father was described as one of the richest people in Singapore, Philip Young. "*Philip Young's boy? Aiyah, when did he shoot up like that? He's so handsome now!*" (Kwan, 2013: 21). Born with the name Young, Nick is the only heir to the treasure of his father and Ahma (grandmother), "*My point exactly. Besides your father, you are the only Young left in the line. You are the heir apparent, whether you choose to believe it or not.*" (Kwan, 2013: 125), This is the main reason why Eleanor has become very picky with his life partner, because his mother does not want the treasures that have been collected for centuries to fall into the wrong hands. This is related to the theory put forward by Belk (1985) regarding materialism, namely individuals who place worldly ownership to achieve happiness in life so that worldly ownership is considered as a life goal. This mindset falls into the two

dimensions described by Belk, namely possessiveness, which is the tendency to maintain control or ownership of one's property. Eleanor tends not to want to give Rachel a chance to enjoy the treasure that her family has collected, even though Rachel may not be part of the family. This is similar to Nongenerosity, which is a reluctance to give away wealth or share property with others.

Even though they were born and raised in Singapore, Nick's family feels that they still hold strong Chinese customs. This is inversely proportional to the fact that, giving the name 'Nick' does not reflect they still adhere to Chinese customs. This is related to the diaspora of the crossbreed Chinese to Asia, unconsciously they have merged with the local culture.

Although living in luxury, Nick's life is always set and he feels that he is not given the freedom to choose. *"Not in my case. Rachel, you know how to overbearing Chinese parents can be."* (Kwan, 2013: 58). The existence of inner conflict or man against himself that happened to Nick can be seen from this situation. He felt pressured by what was determined by his mother. Since Nick was a child, Eleanor always arranged everything for Nick without knowing he liked it or not, no matter whether Nick was all grown up and could make his own decisions, Eleanor always wanted to be in control of Nick's life. Nick explained that his family is different from Rachel, Asian parents tend to be more formal with their children and do not talk about matters relating to personal life, further more about feelings, *"We're just different. We're much formal with each other, and we don't really discuss our emotional lives at all."* (Kwan, 2013: 58). While Rachel is more open and has a very close relationship with her mother. She always tells her mother everything, including her personal life, even her mother found out about Nick 5 minutes after their first date and sat down to have dinner together two months later.

"That's not the case over here. No matter how advanced we've become, there's still pressure for girls to get married. Here, it doesn't matter how successful a woman is professionally. She isn't considered complete until she is married and has a child." (Kwan, 2015:

225) In the quote above, a difference in perspective is seen between Rachel and Nick's family. Rachel explained that she had never been raised to believe that marriage must be her life's goal, her mother wanted her to get the best education first. This is inversely proportional to the statement of Sophie (the sister of a character named Colin Khoo), Sophie explained that no matter how successful women are, in Asia there will always be enormous pressure for girls to get married. And no matter how successful a woman is professionally, they will not be considered complete until they are married and have children. A bitter but true fact, patriarchy is still very thick in Asia. This shows how different the views, thoughts and principles between Rachel and Nick's family.

"Really? What's her name, and where is she from? Daisy, if you tell me she's from Mainland China, I think I'll have a stroke," Eleanor warned." (Kwan, 2013: 29) Ethnocentrism in this novel occurs when Eleanor, Nick's mother, worries that Nick's lover is a mainland Chinese. As seen in the quote above, there are two types of Chinese in China.

First, Chinese from mainland China, they were fugitives from mainland China during the Qing Dynasty. Most work as unskilled laborers or helpers, seldom do those who master Malay or English. They still speak in local or Mandarin dialects. These native Chinese have a much lower social standing than the crossbreed. And then there are crossbreed Chinese, they are people who left China long before the communists entered, then spread throughout Asia. Crossbreed Chinese are Chinese descendants who have entered into marriages with Malays and adopted various Malay, English, Dutch and Indian cultures, and secretly amassed large amounts of wealth over time. They are controlling trade in Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Crossbreed China is a society that is respectful, cultured, smart, and successful. This stereotype has been attached for a long time, so they do not want to be on par with mainland China, according to them it is a degradation of self-esteem. This is related to the theory of Umi Pujiyanti and Fatkhunaimah which states that ethnocentrism is a perception held by every

individual who considers that their culture is better than other cultures, in this quote we can see that crossbreed Chinese consider their people better than mainland Chinese. In the end, mainland Chinese or crossbreed Chinese, they all came from the same country, which is China.

In the quote above, Eleanor considers that her family came from educated and respectable crossbreed China. "*I think I'll Have a Stroke*". Eleanor's words express rejection, anger or disapproval. According to her, whoever will be Nick's wife, one of the requirements that must be met is from crossbreed China. As quoted above, it is a degradation of self-esteem if Eleanor has a daughter-in-law from mainland China. As Eleanor feared, Rachel was indeed from mainland China, which triggered further conflict between Rachel and Nick's family. In the interaction of mixing cultures, people sometimes assume that what they feel is absolutely right or true, because they grow up and think that it is the right thing. Ethnocentric acceptance or establishment can lead to negative judgments about other cultures.

As it is seen in this quote: "*Besides, how many nights a week do you already spend at his place? I'm shocked you two haven't moved in together yet.*" (Kwan, 2013: 33) Rachel's mother, Kerry, asked why they had not lived together since they had been in love for two years. In American culture, living together and having children without a bond is a natural thing, naturally, they believe that marriage is only a symbol not a guarantee to be faithful to the end of life. Although Kerry grew up in a family that was still very thick with customs, but Kerry decided not to raise Rachel like a Chinese mother in general. "*So disgraceful! Sharing a hotel room when they aren't even married!*" (Kwan, 2013: 91) This quote was said by Nick's aunt when they visited Singapore for Colin Khoo's wedding, in stark contrast to Rachel's mother's thought, aunt Nick considered staying in one room without any marriage ties was something to be ashamed of. In Asian culture, including Chinese, living together is a very taboo and shameful thing to do, only married couples who have the right to live together, it is not appropriate for

couples who do not yet have a bond to live under one roof.

The quote, '*So Disgraceful*' states that Nick's aunt is embarrassed or disappointed in what Nick did. In accordance with the theory that in the interaction of cultural mixing, speakers sometimes take what they feel is right because they become adults and think that it is the best. Ethnocentric acceptance or establishment can lead to negative judgments about other cultures. Nick's aunt thought that her culture was the most correct, so she considered what was done by Nick and Rachel embarrassing, very different from the statement of Rachel's mother who asked why they had not lived together. Problems can be resolved if one party wants to change their perception and understand, in terms of understanding that culture and the way of life is very diverse. But it can continue to conflict if the thought of 'my culture is better' is not avoided.

Stereotypes also occur in this novel, Rachel is a girl of Chinese descent who lived and spent her childhood in America. "*GF, I think. Looks ABC.*" (Kwan 2013: 21), This prejudice was addressed to Rachel, when Nick's little friend accidentally saw them. ABC itself is American-Born Chinese, a term that is widely used to refer to Americans who are born naturally of Chinese descent, excluding first-generation immigrants. They generalize that ABC is a descendant of a farmer who is too stupid to survive in China and is worse than a Taiwanese girl for being Westernized, and losing her Chinese culture. 'Westernized' this term refers to Americans, before many Chinese migrated, the Chinese had first instilled a label of generalization towards Americans, in a bad context. This relates to the theory which states that stereotypes are generalizations of a group through past experiences, which are rooted in the minds of everyone, in other definitions, stereotypes can be interpreted as thinking about a particular group but sometimes it is not in accordance with reality.

"*Well, it was bad enough for me to institute a 'no Asian guys' policy about five years ago,*" (Kwan, 2013: 77). In this quote contained stereotypes made by Rachel

about Asian men through past experience. Because Rachel grew up without a father, Rachel has stereotypes or labels that stigmatized Asian men. According to her, Asian men really see a great deal of the physical appearance, such as how big the eyes are, whether the eyelids are naturally lids, whether she has good hips for childbearing. If she passes the physical test, the young Asian man will start an interrogation about academics, social status, and various talents to determine whether it is possible to become a 'wife and son-giver' candidate. And they don't hesitate to show off about their wealth, what kind of doctor their parents are, the model of the car they drive. Bad experiences dating with Asian men made Rachel build a separate label in her mind. But Rachel managed to put aside her stereotypical thoughts about Nick, and tried to get to know him more deeply. Apparently Nick managed to convince Rachel that not all Asian men like what she thinks. This proves that the stereotype is not entirely true and sometimes what is pictured in the mind does not correspond to reality.

"Well, Sylvia's a good friend, and she was always trying to set me up. She just thought Nick was cute and a total catch ... "Rachel began, instantly regretting her choice of words. (Kwan, 2013: 214) Araminta's friends always bother Rachel, as in the quote above when they ask about how she and Nick met. Rachel regretted her words, hoping that they understood the meaning of the 'good catch' was not about material or money. This is related to the theory which states that misinterpretation can occur because people fail to interpret verbal and non-verbal communication correctly. In this quote Araminta's friends fail to interpret Rachel's words. According to them, Rachel meant that Nick was a good catch because Nick was a tycoon child and came from a respectable family. They label Rachel as realistic, it spurs other conflicts.

She screamed, jerking backward in horror and knocking over the table lamp. Her bag was filled with a large fish that had been badly mutilated, blood seeping out from its gills. Violently scrawled on the vanity mirror above the chair in fish blood were the words "CATCH THIS, YOU GOLD-DIGGED CUNT!" (Kwan, 2013:18) This quote signifies that misunderstanding or

misinterpretation can cause continued cultural conflicts to occur. Araminta's friends put the dead fish covered in blood which was mutilated into several pieces with the words 'THANK YOU, YOU GET GOLD' displayed in makeup. Rachel was shocked and scared to death, couldn't believe it that she herself would experience something like this. She was traumatized and shocked, Rachel came to Singapore just for the summer holidays. All of Nick's family and friends had assumed that they would get married soon when the fact was Rachel and Nick never even talked about marriage.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research, it can be concluded that the cultural conflicts experienced by central characters, Rachel and Nick, are the result of differences in cultural backgrounds and social strata of the family between the two. As in this story, internal conflicts between ethnic groups can still occur. This can happen for a variety of reasons, one of which is because of many Chinese diaspora that unconsciously have mixed with the local culture. Therefore, they label and categorize certain groups as Chinese-Americans are too westernized, Chinese-Singaporeans are old rich people, and others. Though the stereotype is not necessarily true, and cannot be proven. This forms the ethnocentrism mindset, that is, an assessment of another culture, on the basis of a culture's own values and standards.

Like Nick's family mindset, they regard Rachel as a Chinese person who has fused with American culture. This is undeniable, Rachel grew up in America, the environment is very influential on the development of her mindset. Not familiar with the lifestyle and culture of Nick's family. Rachel did not know what not to do and what was allowed. The difference in the way of life that contrasts sharply with the environment that she lives on everyday makes Rachel difficult to adapt. This caused a misunderstanding / misinterpretation between Nick and Rachel's family. Differences in social strata also play a role in the cause of conflict, the view of valuing someone from material or materialism. Like the title of this novel 'Crazy Rich Asian' rich people who are truly rich, in the

context of this story represented by Nick's family. They tend to recognize or prove self-worth through achievement or expensive assets. Nick's family did not see this in Rachel, because to them, she was just an ordinary person.

In this novel, it can be said that there is no obvious settlement to the cultural conflicts experienced by the central characters because the ending of this novel is an open plot or has a hanging ending. Nick chose to marry Rachel and left his family. A very difficult decision for Nick, but his family remained in its stance and did not want to accept Rachel as a family member. Finally, the result of this study shows that cultural conflict is a real situation that occurs in the midst of the multicultural life of society, it can occur due to conflicts of values caused by cultural differences. The problem of inter-ethnic conflict can be resolved if there is a willingness from each ethnic group to be open, both in communication and attitudes towards all things new. This is important because through this openness, each ethnic group can foster a sensitivity to mutual respect, non-discrimination, and erode the stereotypes and prejudices that have taken root in each ethnicity.

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