

**CULTURAL OPPRESSION AS SEEN IN *THE BIG SICK* (2017)**

**A GRADUATING PAPER**

Submitted in Partial of the Requirements for Gaining the Bachelor Degree in  
English Literature



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## A FINAL PROJECT STATEMENT

I certify that this thesis is definitely my own work. I am completely responsible for the content of this thesis. Other writer's opinions or findings included in the thesis are quoted or cited in accordance with ethical standards.

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Atas perhatiannya, saya ucapkan terima kasih

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## **MOTTO**

**Lokā Samasthā Sukhino Bhavantu.**

**(May all beings in the universe be happy and free)**

**-Mangala Mantra (Auspicious Prayer)-**



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## DEDICATION

This graduating paper is firstly dedicated to the person who has put her heart and all the hard work into this paper, Metri Kumala Ayuningtyas. Yet, most importantly, it is proudly dedicated to the great people who have raised her very well, Slamet Martono, Tri Sutarmi, Metri Harseno, and Metri Gilang Yuantoro.



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## CULTURAL OPPRESSION AS SEEN IN *THE BIG SICK* (2017)

### ABSTRACT

By: Metri Kumala Ayuningtyas

This research aims to analyze the oppression of Kumail Nanjiani, the main character in *The Big Sick* (2017), as the effect of ideological construction through language and cultural apparatus. American's notion of melting pot is supposed to eliminate the oppressive culture, yet it does not happen in *The Big Sick* (2017). Since Kumail lives in America, he has been Americanized. Meanwhile, his family still holds onto their culture and protects it in many ways. It is including controlling Kumail to remain following the rules of their culture as his family. Therefore, it causes an oppression to Kumail which comes from his family and surrounding. This research focuses on finding the type of oppression, the representation of oppression, and Kumail's responds to the oppression. This research uses the theory of representation by Stuart Hall to analyze the problem. Meanwhile, the method of this research is qualitative. Seen from Kumail's joke materials, the type of oppression that he feels is cultural oppression. This cultural oppression is triggered by religion, tradition, and nationality. After conducting the research, the researcher concludes three research findings. First, in religion oppression, Kumail is expected to be a good Muslim. Next, in tradition oppression, his family urges him to marry a Pakistani woman. Last, in nationality oppression, Kumail gets racial treatment from American people.

**Keywords:** *Representation, cultural oppression, The Big Sick (2017), Kumail Nanjiani, immigrant, identity, ideology, stereotypes.*

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## CULTURAL OPPRESSION AS SEEN IN *THE BIG SICK* (2017)

### ABSTRAK

By: Metri Kumala Ayuningtyas

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tekanan terhadap Kumail Nanjiani, tokoh utama dalam *The Big Sick* (2017), sebagai pengaruh konstruksi ideologis melalui perangkat bahasa dan budaya. Gagasan Amerika tentang *melting pot* seharusnya menghilangkan budaya yang bersifat menekan, namun itu tidak terjadi dalam *The Big Sick* (2017). Sejak Kumail tinggal di Amerika, ia telah menjadi seperti orang Amerika. Sementara itu, keluarganya masih memegang budaya mereka serta melindunginya dengan banyak cara. Hal itu termasuk mengendalikan Kumail untuk tetap mengikuti aturan budaya mereka seperti yang dilakukan keluarganya. Karena itu, hal tersebut menyebabkan tekanan terhadap Kumail yang berasal dari keluarganya dan lingkungan sekitarnya. Penelitian ini berfokus pada menemukan jenis tekanan, representasinya, serta respon-respon Kumail terhadap tekanan tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori representasi oleh Stuart Hall untuk menganalisis masalah. Sementara itu, metode penelitian ini adalah kualitatif. Dilihat dari bahan lelucon Kumail, jenis tekanan yang ia rasakan adalah tekanan kebudayaan. Tekanan kebudayaan ini dipicu oleh agama, tradisi, dan kebangsaan. Setelah melakukan penelitian, peneliti menyimpulkan tiga temuan penelitian. Pertama, dalam penindasan agama, Kumail diharapkan menjadi Muslim yang baik. Selanjutnya, dalam penindasan tradisi, keluarganya mendesaknya untuk menikahi seorang wanita Pakistan. Terakhir, dalam penindasan kebangsaan, Kumail mendapat perlakuan rasial dari orang Amerika.

**Kata-kunci:** *Representasi, tekanan kebudayaan, The Big Sick (2017), Kumail Nanjiani, imigran, identitas, ideologi, stereotip.*

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of Study

Every area in this world has a community or a group of people where they live together and share the same idea of life. In *Self-Reliance*, Ralph Waldo Emerson smartly pointed out his perspective of seeing a society, which will be served as an opening for this research:

There are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs (Emerson, 1841:3).

Based on his statement on one of the paragraphs of *Self-Reliance*, Emerson saw that society is a block for a man to possibly live his life to the fullest, and most importantly, to live the life only by listening to his inner voice. In another perspective such as liberalism, society is often depicted as a tyrant, which John Stuart Mill described in his book *In Liberty*:

“... when society itself is the tyrant - society collectively over the separate individuals who compose it - its means of tyrannizing are not restricted to the acts which it may do by the hands of its political functionaries. Society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme



penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself.” (Mill, 1895: 13).

As seen in the perspective of sociology, family is the first agent of society for an individual to learn and to experience many things for the first time. Therefore, family has the biggest role for an individual to grow, eventually to be an independent being. In contrast to the statements about society quoted from Emerson’s and Mill’s perspectives, family can be the first oppressor to an individual. As Mill has stated, society itself is the tyrant, and family is included in the part of society known as its smallest unit.

In a family, for instance, there is a domestic structure which definitely exists. Parents are in the highest position of domestic structure, followed by older siblings whose position is lower than parents, yet still higher than the younger ones. This classification has unconsciously caused an oppression because the persons in the higher position feel that they have more power upon others. Oppression itself, according to Hegel, is seen as a failure to recognize the equal moral worth and dignity of another (Cudd, 2006:9). In this case, parents think that they have power to control their children because culture enhances the reason why they do so.

Culture itself is such a difficult term to define as it is explained in many perspectives. One of those perspectives is anthropology, which defines culture as the way of life of people, also known as shared values of a group of people or society. This statement is what Emerson meant by stating that society is “a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread



to each shareholder”. Another example of oppression can also be seen through racism in multicultural countries such as America because there is a dominant race which has a stereotype that the dominant race people are superior to the minority ones.

In contrast to the definition of culture earlier, Stuart Hall states that culture is about shared meanings, and language is the privileged medium in which people ‘make sense’ of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged (Hall, 1997:1). In literature field, some literary works can deliver the language in order to share meanings of a culture, and they are not only formed in a writing such as poem, novel, and short story but also formed in a movie. This statement is based on Graeme Turner perspective which points out that movie can work as a language too because it generates meanings through system (cinematography, sound editing, and so on) as it is firstly seen as communication (1999:52).

This research uses a movie as the object analysis entitled *The Big Sick* (2017). *The Big Sick* (2017) is a movie directed by Michael Showalter and produced by Judd Appatow and Barry Mendel. It is American romantic comedy which is based on the real love life of the writers, Emily V. Gordon and Kumail Nanjiani. The movie was released on January 20, 2017 in the United States. Going popular on July 14, 2017, *The Big Sick* (2017) was chosen as the top 10 films of the year by American Film Institute and nominated for the Academy Awards as the best original Screenplay. It is starring Kumail Nanjiani as the main character, Zoe Kazan as Emily Gardner, Holly Hunter as Beth (Emily’s mother), Ray Romano as Terry (Emily’s father), Zenobia Shroff as Sharmeen (Kumail’s

mother), Anupam Kheer as Azmat (Kumail's father), Adeel Akhtar as Naveed (Kumail's brother), and Shenaz Treasury as Fatima (Kumail's sister-in-law) (wikipedia.org).

As seen in the movie, Kumail Nanjiani as the main character and his family moved out from Pakistan to America when he was about 13 years old. Started from the age of 13, Kumail has been living in America, which is known as a liberal state that clearly has the opposite culture to his original country, Pakistan. As the researcher has noticed from the movie, Kumail is constantly oppressed by his family in almost every aspect of his life. Those aspects are such as commanding him to pray while he has been doubting his religion, asking him to become a lawyer while his passion is stand-up comedy, and demanding him to marry a Pakistani woman whom his family finds for him while he is in love with an American girl, Emily. His family also oppresses him by urging him to grow facial hair (beard), so he will be looking manly and be considered as a good Muslim.

The oppression does not only come from his family but also from other people who are Americans. Seen in the movie, Kumail makes friends with a lot of Americans, who are also stand-up comedians like him. He also has a girlfriend who is an American. Most of his audiences are Americans too. It causes him to get oppression by some of them as well. From the explanation about the movie and some examples of oppressions that Kumail has suffered, the researcher is interested to analyze the oppression further, such as the type of oppression Kumail feels, the reasons why it occurs, and how Kumail responds to it. Therefore, this

analysis uses the theory of representation by Stuart Hall using the constructionist approach to see how the oppression is represented in the movie.

Moreover, to support the analysis, film theory is also applied in this research. Film theory will deepen the analysis by adding another perspective for analyzing the data. Framing techniques and camera angles will explain the explicit meaning based on how the figures are captured on every scene. Color scheme will explain the meaning of particular color used on the scene. Then, *mise-en-scene* will explain the composition of a movie clearly seen from the setting, properties, lighting, costumes, make-up, and figure behavior.

## **1.2 Research Question**

This research aims to find out the following questions:

- 1) What is the type of oppression that Kumail Nanjiani feels and how is it represented in *The Big Sick* (2017)?
- 2) How does Kumail Nanjiani respond to the oppression represented in *The Big Sick* (2017)?

## **1.3 Objective of Study**

The objectives of study are to find out the type of oppression Kumail feels and how it is represented in *The Big Sick* (2017). Afterwards, it aims to analyze how Kumail responds to the oppression.

## **1.4 Significance of Study**

The aim of this research is first to help the researcher to understand more about the oppression which commonly occurs in this life. By then, it can hopefully help both the researcher and the readers to be more aware of human

equality. No soul is meant to be enslaved by any culture or by anything because every human deserves to live the life to the fullest, exactly as they desire the most. Theoretically, this research aims to challenge everyone to think more critically, so people can respect diversity.

### **1.5 Literature Review**

Released in 2017 makes *The Big Sick* (2017) still lack of thesis and journal that use it as an object of analysis. Luckily, the researcher finds a journal which analyzes *The Big Sick* (2017) as the main object of analysis. The journal is entitled *The Contrast Portrayals of American and Pakistani Culture in The Big Sick Movie*, written by four students of English Department, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia, named Nidia Nikita, Ranti Andela, Ghina Zahra Fauziah, Zhia Aulia Nazaf. This journal describes the cultural stereotypes between American and Pakistani using the theory of characterization from Boggs and the theory of representation by Stuart Hall. The conclusion of this journal is the different characteristic between American and Pakistani in *The Big Sick* (2017). Cultural stereotype is also found in the movie as the result of this journal research. Pakistani characters are associated with conservatism and close-mindedness. On the contrary, American characters are associated with modernism and open-mindedness. It can be concluded that in this movie American characters are depicted as more positive than Pakistani.

The researcher uses the same object and theory as well, but what makes this research different is the issue and the secondary theory which is used to support the analysis. The issue of this research focuses on what type of oppression

is found in the movie, how it is represented, and how Kumail responds to the oppression. Meanwhile, the journal mainly focuses on cultural stereotypes between American and Pakistani characters in *The Big Sick* (2017). The second difference is the secondary theory that the researcher uses to analyze the issue. In this research, the researcher uses two theories. The main theory is representation by Stuart Hall which focuses on constructionist approach. The second theory is film theory to support the analysis. Meanwhile, the journal uses representation by Stuart Hall as the main theory which also focuses on constructionist approach, but it uses characterization theory by Boggs as the secondary theory to support the analysis.

## **1.6 Theoretical Approach**

### **1.6.1 Representation Theory**

The Stuart Hall states that representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent the world meaningfully to other people as an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. Representation, therefore, connects meaning and language to culture (Hall, 1997:15). There are three approaches which show how representation connects meaning and language to culture. They are reflective, intentional, and constructionist. The first is reflective approach which has the perspective of seeing meaning as it is thought to lie in the object, person, idea, or even the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world. The second approach is intentional, which has the opposite perspective compared to the first one. It argues



that the speaker or the author imposes his or her unique meaning in the world through language. Words mean exactly what the author intends they should mean (Hall, 1997:24-25).

The last approach is constructionist which, as Stuart Hall has pointed out, has the most significant impact on cultural studies in recent years because it concentrates on how language and signification (the use of signs in language) works to produce meanings by constructing it through conceptual systems of culture. Constructionist approach has the perspective of seeing language to produce meaning by not to confuse the material world, where things and people exist, the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. because it is the language system that people are using to represent their concepts. Eventually, it is their conceptual systems of their culture, the linguistics, and other representational systems to construct the meaning (Hall, 1997:25).

To see how language produces meaning, constructionist has two major variants. The first is semiotics, which is influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, and the second is discursive approach, which is associated with Michel Foucault. Semiotics as the first major is about sign. As cited from Stuart Hall (1997:31), Jonathan Culler (1976:19), the production of meaning depends on language, whereas language is a system of signs. Signs can be seen as images, colors (traffic lights, for instance), written words (poems, for example, which contain a lot of metaphors as signs), paintings, and photographs. All of them function as signs within language only when they express or communicate ideas.

According to Saussure, there are two elements of sign; signifier and signified. Signifier is the form of the actual words, images, and other things that contains ideas, while the idea itself is what Saussure argues as signified. Both are required to produce meaning, and the relation between them is influenced by culture that sustains representation. For example, to define the meaning of father, we have to find out its relation and difference from another term, such as mother, daughter, son, and so on. Thus, it is the relation between signifier and signified that matters. As Saussure has stated that signs are members of systems and defined in relation to the other members of that system (Hall, 1997:31).

The second major variant is discursive approach by Foucault, which is more grounded in historical specificities than semiotic approach. His main concern is the relation of power, not the relation of meaning. Thus, his main major of discursive approach ideas is discourse, power and knowledge, and subject. As a constructionist, Foucault was concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning through discourse. According to Foucault, discourse means a group of statements, which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic in a particular historical moment. It is about the production of knowledge through language. All practices have discursive aspects because they all entail meanings, and meanings shape and influence what humans do. Therefore, discourse is about language and practice which constructs the topic, defines it, and produces the object of human's knowledge (Hall, 1997:43-44).



Knowledge itself, as Foucault argues, is linked to power. It does not only assume the authority of the truth, but also has the power to make itself true. Knowledge functions to regulate the conducts of others and to entail constraint, regulation, and the disciplining of practices. Therefore, it creates a new concept of power which, according to Foucault, does not function in the form of a chain, but circulates like a net-like organization. It suggests that humans are caught up in its circulation – oppressors and oppressed (Hall, 1997:49-50). As it has clearly seen, Foucault states that it is discourse which produces knowledge, not subject. It is not necessary to find a subject for power/knowledge to operate. As according to him, subject is produced within discourse because it must submit its rules and conventions to its dispositions of power/knowledge (Hall, 1997:54-55).

### **1.6.2 Film Theory**

The second theory in this research is film theory. According to Stam (2000:5) film theory is rarely pure; it is usually laced with an admixture of literary criticism, social commentary, and philosophical speculation. Based on that statement, it is reasonable that film theory is needed to support this research, not only because the object is a movie. In this research, cinematography focuses on the framing techniques, camera angles, and *mise-en-scene*.

Villarejo classified the framing techniques and camera angles into seven types followed by each function to deepen the analysis cited from [www.nofilm.com](http://www.nofilm.com), such as:

- a) The extreme long shot (ELS), in which one can barely distinguish the human figure, used to create scope and scale as well as to set tone and mood.
- b) The long shot (LS), in which humans are distinguishable, but remain dwarfed by the background, used to establish the beginning or the end of a scene.
- c) The medium long shot (MLS), or plan American, in which the human is framed from the knees up;
- d) The medium shot (MS), in which we move slightly to frame the human from the waist up;
- e) The medium close-up (MCU), in which we are slightly closer and see the human from the chest up;
- f) The close-up (CU), which isolates a portion of a human (the face, most prominently);
- g) The extreme close-up (ECU), in which we see a mere portion of the face (an eye, the lips).

*Mise-en-scène* is also included in the cinematography which has six components, such as setting, which includes place, time, and mood. Properties help to amplify a mood, give further definition to a setting, or call attention to detail within the larger scene. Lighting establishes mood and directs attention to detail. It has three sources of lighting named key light, fill light, and backlight. Moreover, lighting also has two types of effect, high-key (little contrast between bright and dark obtains, soft and revealing of detail) and low-key (high contrast,

harsh, and hard). Costumes delineate the world of film and characters as well. Hair and make-up function to create some specific appearances of the actors and actresses. Figure behavior shows the activities which deaden the language (Villarejo, 2006: 29-35).

## **1.7 Method of Research**

In this method of research, the researcher explains about type of research, data sources, data collection technique, and data analysis technique of this paper.

### **1.7.1 Type of Research**

This research uses qualitative method to analyze the data. According to Creswell, qualitative methods are used to explore and understand the meaning of individuals or groups related to social or human problems (2014: 294). Therefore, the researcher does not do any interviews, but only focuses on the elements of the movie, intrinsic, and extrinsic. Then, they are analyzed descriptively.

### **1.7.2 Data Sources**

This research contains two types of data sources. *The Big Sick* (2017) is the main source of data in this research. The main data are classified into dialogues and scenes (screenshots of events in the movie). Moreover, the supporting data are books and journals that the researcher gets from the reliable sources on the internet.

### **1.7.3 Data Collection Technique**

In this research, the researcher uses several data collection techniques. The first is reading the movie, which means watching the movie repeatedly to find the suitable scenes which can be categorized into the data. After that, the researcher

finds culture as the variable from the theory of representation, which next is divided into several categories. They are gender, religion, tradition, and nationality.

#### **1.7.4 Data Analysis Technique**

To analyze the data, the researcher uses two theories, representation as the main theory and film theory to support the analysis. After all the data have been collected and selected, the researcher classifies them into the variables and categories from the theory of representation. Also, film theory sharpens the analysis by analyzing the data through the cinematography which contains framing techniques, camera angles, and *mise-en-scene*. Last, the researcher concludes the data which have been analyzed using those theories.

#### **1.8 Paper Organization**

This paper consists of four chapters. The first chapter discusses about introduction of the research, mainly about the issue as the background of choosing the subject and the theory which suits best to solve the issue. The second chapter is about the intrinsic elements of *The Big Sick* to demonstrate the researcher's understanding on the subject. The third chapter is the analysis of data. The last chapter is the conclusion and suggestions, which concludes the main point of analysis result as the answer of research questions.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

#### 4.1 Conclusion

Based on the analysis, the type of oppression that Kumail feels is cultural oppression. It is represented by Kumail who always talks about his culture, especially during his stand-up comedy performances. Culture itself has some aspects that can be the triggers of oppression. As it has been explained on the analysis, there are gender, religion, tradition, and nationality. Furthermore, those aspects are causative. Referring to the analysis, the causality can be seen from how religion affects tradition, for instance, growing a beard and arranged marriage. However, there are only three of those which have the highest intensity to cause oppression to Kumail. They are religion, tradition, and nationality as it is seen from the conflict of the story which is also Kumail's biggest responses.

Meanwhile, gender has the lower intensity to cause oppression to Kumail because Kumail does not give the response as big as the highest intensity ones. Based on the analysis, gender oppression that Kumail feels is mainly about appearance. Such as growing a beard and being stylish, it does not really matter for him. Therefore, Kumail's oppression is constructed by ideology through language and cultural apparatus.

#### 4.2 Suggestion

According to the researcher, *The Big Sick* (2017) is a movie full of cultural things which are broad to explore. Therefore, the researcher also thinks that the main character, Kumail Nanjiani, can be analyzed from the lens of psychoanalysis

to analyze the oppression that he feels further. Also, the theory of post-colonial can also be used to discover other side reasons why Kumail changes to be more American while he is originally a Pakistani. Binary opposition theory can also be used to analyze the Pakistani and American characters in *The Big Sick* (2017).





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# CURRICULUM VITAE

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## EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Formal Education		
Period	School/Institute	Major
2016-2020	Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga	English Literature
2013-2016	Pringsewu Senior High School 1	Social Science
2010-2013	Kalirejo Junior High School 1	-
2004-2010	Kalirejo Elementary School 1	-

Non Formal Education	
Period	School/Institute
2017-2018	Academia De Espanol Indonesia Yogyakarta
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