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**The Struggles of Asian Immigrants in
The Documentary “Being Asians in America (2022)”**

Andika Heka Putra^a, Sukarni Suryaningsih^a

^aEnglish Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia

sukarnisuryaningsih@gmail.com

Abstract

Documentary films are one of the media which are able to represent social reality while building public understanding of the experiences of minority groups. This study aims to analyze the representation of the struggles of Asian immigrants in the documentary *Being Asians in America* (2022) produced by the Pew Research Center. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the film text analysis method. The research data in the form of dialogues, narratives, and scenes related to the experiences of Asian immigrants were then analyzed using the perspective of *Critical Race Theory* to uncover power relations, discriminatory practices, and representational politics built in the film. The results show that this documentary represents the experience of Asian immigrants as a complex process, from the arrival of Chinese, Japanese, Sikhs, and Pakistanis to the United States to their struggles with stereotypes, discrimination, hate crimes, physical violence, language barriers, and limited access to social and economic opportunities. On the other hand, the film also shows various adaptation strategies carried out by immigrants through education, entrepreneurship, community solidarity, and the preservation of cultural identity as a form of resistance to marginalization.

Keywords: documentary; Asian immigrants; *Being Asians in America*; *Critical Race Theory*; representation; identity.

1. Introduction

The United States is known as a multiracial country which was formed through waves of migration from different parts of the world. This ethnic diversity makes American society have a complex social structure, with racial groups such as White, Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American coexisting in the same social space. Among these groups, Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing populations due to increased migration flows since immigration policy reform in 1965. Despite being often perceived as *a minority model*, Asian people in America still face various forms of marginalization, racial stereotypes, discrimination, and identity negotiations as a minority group. This condition shows that racial diversity in America is not always followed by the creation of social equality, but is still colored by power relations that affect the life experiences of each ethnic group (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993).

In the last three years, the dynamics of Asian American life have increasingly received academic and public attention. A national survey by Pew Research shows that most Asians in America are generations of immigrants or descendants of immigrants who have different experiences in building identities, maintaining their native culture, and adapting to American society. The study also shows that the experience of discrimination, stereotypes as *perpetual foreigners*, and increasing anti-Asian

sentiment after the COVID-19 pandemic are still issues that affect the Asian community's *sense of belonging* to the United States (Pew Research Centre, 2022). The findings indicate that economic success does not automatically erase the racial inequities experienced by Asian groups in America.

One of the documentaries that specifically raises this issue is *Being Asian in America* (2022) produced by the Pew Research Center. The film is part of a research project involving 66 focus groups of 264 participants from 18 Asian ethnic groups in the United States. The documentary presents individual stories about identity, family, migration, discrimination, and what it means to be Asian in America through the real experiences of the speakers. Thus, this documentary not only becomes a medium of social documentation, but also represents the construction of Asian American identity in American multicultural society (Pew Research Centre, 2022).

This phenomenon is relevant to be analyzed using the perspective of *Critical Race Theory* (CRT). This perspective views that racism is not just an individual act, but has become part of a social structure that forms power relations, stereotypes, and exclusionary practices against Asian groups. It also explains that the *stereotype of the minority* and *perpetual foreigner model* is a mechanism that continues to reproduce the marginalized position of Asian people in America, even though they have contributed in various sectors of life (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993).

Based on this description, this study seeks to answer the question: how is the struggle of Asian immigrants narrated in the documentary *Being Asian in America* (2022)? This research aims to identify forms of representation of the struggles of Asian immigrants and uncover how documentary narratives build discourses about identity, discrimination, and resistance through the perspective of *Critical Race Theory*. Academically, this research is expected to enrich the study of documentary films, media representation, and racial studies in the United States, as well as contribute to the development of cultural and communication studies on the representation of minority groups in contemporary media (Ruiz et al., 2022).

2. Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the representation of the struggles of Asian immigrants in the documentary *Being Asians in America* (2022). The descriptive qualitative approach aims to understand a social phenomenon in depth through the interpretation of the meanings contained in texts, symbols, language, and cultural practices without manipulating the object of research. This approach views reality as a social construct formed through experiences, interactions, and cultural contexts, thus allowing researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the meanings produced in a media text (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In line with that, qualitative research seeks to explain how meaning is formed through the process of representation and how the media reproduces social reality through the narratives it constructs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In media studies, this method is widely used to reveal the representation of identities, power relations, and the experiences of minority groups represented through audiovisual texts (Tracy, 2019).

The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because documentary films are cultural texts that contain various sign systems in the form of images, dialogues, narratives, visual expressions, and social contexts that are interrelated in building meaning. It seeks to understand how the experiences of Asian immigrants are constructed through storylines, testimonies of the speakers, and visual representations shown in films. According to Rose (2023), visual and media analysis allows researchers to uncover how images, language, and narratives work as representational practices that shape the audience's understanding of a social group (Rose, 2023).

A descriptive qualitative approach is considered most appropriate to explain how this documentary builds a discourse on Asian identity, discrimination, migration, and the struggles of Asian people in the United States. Data analysis was carried out using *the film text analysis* method which views film as a

cultural text that can be read through narrative elements and cinematic elements. The analysis stages included watching the film repeatedly, transcribing relevant dialogues, identifying scenes related to migration, stereotypes, discrimination, violence, language, economics, and identity formation, then grouping the data into research themes. Furthermore, each theme is interpreted using a *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) perspective to reveal how the film represents power relations, *othering practices*, and the construction of racial identity towards Asian immigrants.

3. Results

3.1. Asian Immigrants

The documentary *Being Asians in America* (2022) represents the arrival of Chinese immigrants as a migration process that is heavily influenced by state policies. Through James' narration, it is explained that his family migrated to Arkansas after the United States government restricted the entry of Chinese immigrants and only provided opportunities for certain groups, such as merchants and professionals. This condition encouraged his family to build a grocery store business as a strategy to maintain economic life while gaining social space in an environment that was still dominated by white people (Pew Research Centre, 2022).

The narrative shows that the migration experience of Chinese people is not solely driven by economic motives, but also shaped by state regulations that control the mobility and life opportunities of migrants. This representation is in line with the perspective of *Asian Critical Race Theory* (AsianCrit) which views that immigration policy in the United States has historically never been neutral, but rather an instrument that reproduces racial hierarchies. AsianCrit explains that Asian people are constructed as *perpetual foreigners*, that is, groups that continue to be positioned as foreigners despite having lived and contributed to American social life for generations. This position causes access to citizenship, employment, and social mobility to always be under the supervision of a power structure dominated by the majority group (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993).

The James' family experience also shows that economic activities, such as opening grocery stores, are not only a survival strategy, but a form of negotiation against discriminatory social structures. In the perspective of *Critical Race Theory*, the economic success of minority groups cannot be understood as evidence of the loss of racism, but rather as the result of adaptation to a system that from the beginning limited their access to social and political resources.

Therefore, the success of the James family in building a business does not erase their position as a minority group that remains restricted based on racial identity. This condition shows that the relationship between race and the economy is part of the power mechanism that works through social institutions and state policies (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993).

In addition, the film shows that the grocery store built by the James family developed into a social space that brought together fellow Chinese immigrants. The existence of these spaces shows how ethnic communities are formed in response to the experiences of social exclusion they experience. From the perspective of the sociology of migration, the formation of ethnic communities is an adaptation strategy that allows immigrants to gain social support, maintain cultural identity, and build economic networks in the midst of limited access to mainstream society (Zhou, 1992).

Meanwhile, the perspective of *Critical Race Theory* explains that immigrant communities not only function as an economic space, but also as an arena of resistance to *othering practices* that continuously construct Asian people as *perpetual foreigners* in American social life (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). Thus, economic spaces such as the grocery store in the film not only represent trade activities, but also become symbols of solidarity and the sustainability of the collective identity of the Asian-American community.

3.1.1. Stereotypes of Asian Immigrants

One of the main themes featured in *Being Asians in America* is the stereotypes that continue to be attached to the Asian community in the United States. The film shows James' experiences growing up during World War II when both the Chinese and Japanese were perceived as the same group simply because they had similar physical characteristics. In his narration, James explains that white people at that time were unable to distinguish Asian ethnic identities so all Asian groups were treated as "foreigners". Whites at that time were all Asians associated with Japan or China. There was a lot of prejudice against Asians at that time. There's a lot of segregation as well between whites and blacks, but as a Chinese, he says that sometimes it's hard to say about "Where should we fit in?" When his brother and sister grew up, they couldn't go to school in their hometown. They had to go to Mississippi to Chinese schools, where they were taught Chinese and English. And then time passed, they allowed the Chinese to come to White schools and become one of the white populations even though they were still in a very small minority. When James was in the third, fourth, or fifth grade, he was often chosen. He would ask some white girls to go on a date, watch a movie, or something. White girls due to different ethnicities will always have excuses and end up never having an accepted date by white women.

This experience was further reinforced when she shared that she was unable to attend public school and often experienced rejection in social relationships, including when white women turned down dating invitations just because of their ethnic identity. This representation suggests that race is understood through visual categories which then results in discriminatory treatment of minority groups. This phenomenon is in line with the concept of *racialization* in *Critical Race Theory* which explains that racial identity is not a biological category, but a social construct formed through power relations.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explain that minority societies are often constructed through certain stereotypes that are then used to justify unequal treatment. In the context of Asian society in America, stereotypes as *perpetual foreigners* cause their identity to continue to be positioned as an outsider despite having been American citizens for generations (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993).

Meanwhile, a similar story also happened to Brent at 20:43-21:19 describing his story in the past where he remembered a girl who moved to Little Rock from Tupelo, Mississippi. Brent had a crush on her for months and finally got the courage to ask her out. She clearly remembered that she was sitting on her front porch and told Brent that she was so sweet. But unfortunately, she said that she couldn't be his girlfriend just because Brent was Chinese. The rejection shows that racial stereotypes not only appear in the public sphere, but also permeate interpersonal relationships.

The film shows that social boundaries are formed through racial identity so that Asian people are still considered different even though they have undergone a process of cultural integration. Brent's experience shows how discrimination takes place in *everyday racism*, through actions that seem simple but have a profound psychological impact on minority groups.

According to Sue et al. (2007), experiences like Brent's experience are a form of *racial microaggressions*, which are everyday behaviors that verbally and nonverbally convey the message that a person is viewed as inferior because of his or her racial identity. This form of discrimination is often taken for granted by the majority of society, but for minority groups it is an experience that continues to assert their position as citizens that is not fully accepted (Wing Sue et al., 2007).

Therefore, this documentary succeeds in showing that stereotypes are not only a matter of perception, but also a social mechanism that affects the opportunity of individuals to build social relationships.

The stereotypical narrative was further strengthened through Sahid's experience after the September 11, 2001 attacks. As a Pakistani-American who works as a taxi driver, he recounts how people shouted at him to return to his country, even linking him to acts of terrorism. Shahid chose to remain silent

because he was worried that he would experience violence if he gave resistance. The film shows that racial and religious identities are often fused into one category so that Muslims and South Asians are seen as a threat to national security.

In the perspective of *Orientalism*, Shahid's experience reflects how Eastern society is constructed as "the Other" which is dangerous, irrational, and different from Western identity (Said, 1978). After the tragedy of 9/11, the construction was further strengthened so that the Sikh and Pakistani communities experienced increased discrimination despite having no ties to terrorist groups. The documentary shows that stereotypes evolve through political and media narratives that then influence the way society treats Asian minorities.

3.1.2. Hate Crimes and Physical Violence

In addition to stereotypes, the film *Being Asians in America* also shows how racial prejudice develops into hate crimes and physical violence against Asian people. The narrative is conveyed through the experiences of June and Tokiko which tells the life of a Japanese-American family during World War II. June recalled how her family found an announcement ordering all citizens of Japanese descent to leave their neighborhoods.

Tokiko then explained that her family was only given a few days to leave home, bury their belongings, and face accusations that her father was an "enemy of the state" just because he was from Japan. The scene shows how ethnic identity is the basis of the state and society in determining who is considered a national threat.

This experience illustrates the practice of *institutional racism*, which is a form of discrimination that is institutionalized through state policies and social institutions. Bonilla-Silva (2017) explains that modern racism does not only appear in the form of individual actions, but is also manifested through legal systems, public policies, and institutional practices that produce inequality for minority groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2017).

In the context of this documentary, the forced evacuation of Japanese-Americans shows how the state produces *racial fear* so that ethnic identity is treated as a security threat. The policy shows that citizenship status is not always able to protect minority groups when the state constructs race as the basis for political decision-making.

The narrative of physical violence is reinforced through Brent's experience describing his childhood as a child of Chinese descent in the American South. Brent explained that he was beaten several times by other children on his way home from school until he came home covered in blood and lost his lunch box. Interestingly,

Brent stated that the perpetrators of violence did not only come from one racial group, but involved both white and black children. This film shows that the stigma against Asian people has been embedded in the social structure so that it can be reproduced by various groups of people, not just the majority group of whites.

According to Perry (2001), hate crimes are not just criminal acts against individuals, but symbolic messages addressed to all members of the group who have similar identities. Brent's violence can be understood as a social mechanism to assert that Asian people are outside the boundaries of American national identity. Thus, physical violence in this film serves as a form of social control that maintains the dominance of the majority group through intimidation of the minority group (Barbara, 2001).

The event of racial hatred is also illustrated through the experiences of Shahid and Surinder after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The film shows how Sikhs and Pakistanis have been the target of public outrage because it is considered to have the same physical characteristics as terrorist groups. Turbans, beards, and skin color are used as the basis for identifying a person as a threat.

As a result, the Sikh-American community has experienced increased intimidation, verbal harassment, and threats of violence even though they have no connection to terrorist organizations at

all. The documentary shows that racial prejudice is often built through the simplification of ethnic and religious identities into one homogeneous category.

A study by Puar (2007) explained that after the September 11 attacks, there was a process of *racialization of terrorism*, namely the association of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian identities with the threat of terrorism. In this perspective, religious identity is no longer understood as a spiritual practice, but as a political category that determines a person's position in society. Therefore, the film shows that hatred of Asian people is not only born from individual prejudice, but is influenced by the political, media, and national security discourses that shape public perceptions of minority groups (Puar, 2007).

3.1.3. Language and Cultural Barriers

The documentary also highlights language barriers as one of the main challenges faced by Asian immigrants in the early days of their arrival in the United States. Buntha explained that she had difficulty communicating because she didn't understand English at all. These limitations caused her to have difficulty obtaining health services when she had to undergo treatment in the hospital without the presence of a translator. In fact, he did not understand the doctor's explanation about his health condition and the medical expenses that had to be paid. The experience shows that language proficiency is an important factor that determines immigrants' access to public services and social protection.

According to Portes and Rumbaut (2014), language skills are one of the main assets in the process of integrating immigrants into the society of the destination country. Language barriers not only limit communication, but also affect access to education, employment, health services, and social participation. In this documentary, Buntha's experience shows that language limitations lead to dependence on family members and ethnic communities as translators, so the adaptation process takes place slower than those with better English skills (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014).

The narrative of the adaptation process is then shown through the experiences of Helen and Meiyan who gradually learn English after settling in the United States. Helen explained that after learning English, typing skills, and accounting, she gained employment opportunities and began to build social relationships with the surrounding community. Instead, Meiyan revealed that pregnancy caused her to stop taking English courses so that the adaptation process took a slower. Both experiences show that language skills are not only influenced by individual motivations, but also by the social, economic, and family conditions that each immigrant faces.

In the perspective of intercultural communication, language barriers are closely related to the process of identity negotiation. Kim (2001) explained that cultural adaptation is a dynamic process that involves language learning, changes in communication behaviour, and the formation of new identities through interaction with the dominant culture. Therefore, the film shows that mastery of the English language does not mean eliminating the cultural identity of origin, but is a means for immigrants to gain economic opportunities, expand social relations, and build a sense of belonging to American society without having to abandon their cultural roots (Kim, 2001).

3.1.4. Socio-Economic Consequences

The film *Being Asians in America* shows that racial discrimination not only affects the social lives of Asian immigrants, but also has a direct impact on their economic conditions. Brent's narrative of his grandfather's grocery store shows how the family business was targeted by the white supremacist group (*Ku Klux Klan*) who bombed the store several times. The attack not only caused material losses, but also created fear that affected the continuity of the family's business. This film shows that the economic activity of the Asian community is never separated from the dynamics of racial relations that develop in American society.

In the perspective of *Critical Race Theory*, the practice of violence against businesses owned by minority groups is part of the mechanism to maintain the economic dominance of the majority group.

Omi and Winant (2015) explain that race relations are not only built through cultural identity, but also through the unequal distribution of economic resources (Omi & Winant, 2014). Therefore, the act of intimidation against the Brent family-owned shop can be understood as an attempt to maintain a social structure that benefits the dominant group while limiting the economic mobility of the Asian community. Thus, economic discrimination in film does not stand alone, but rather is part of a broader system of racial inequality.

Nonetheless, the documentary also shows that Asian societies are developing various adaptation strategies to maintain the family's economic sustainability. Most of the speakers explained that small businesses, trades, and self-employment are ways to achieve financial stability when access to formal work is still limited by racial prejudice. This condition shows that entrepreneurship develops as a form of social resilience as well as a survival strategy in the face of structural obstacles.

Zhou (1992) explains that the formation of an *ethnic economy* allows immigrant communities to create job opportunities, strengthen internal solidarity, and reduce dependence on discriminatory labor markets. Therefore, the economic success of some Asian communities in the film cannot be separated from the role of ethnic communities that support each other (Zhou, 1992).

The film also criticizes the stereotype of *minority models* that are often attached to the Asian-American community. The economic success shown by some speakers does not mean that all Asian communities enjoy the same opportunities. Rather, their experiences of discrimination, violence, and social restrictions show that such success was achieved through a long struggle in the face of racial inequality. According to Lee and Zhou (2015), the stereotype of *the minority model* has the potential to hide the diversity of experiences of Asian-Americans because it ignores the fact that many Asian groups still face poverty, discrimination, and limited access to education and employment. Thus, the film succeeds in dismantling the assumption that economic success means the loss of racism against Asian people (Lee & Zhou, 2015).

3.1.5. Community Identity Formation

One of the important findings in this documentary is how the experience of discrimination actually encourages the formation of a collective identity among Asian-Americans. This is illustrated by Surinder's experience which explains that after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the Sikh community experienced an increase in prejudice because the turbans and beards they wore were considered synonymous with terrorist groups. In his narrative, Surinder tries to explain to the public that Sikh teachings have absolutely no connection with the Al-Qaeda organization. The statement shows that ethnic and religious identities are becoming an arena for social recognition amid growing Islamophobic sentiment in the United States.

According to Hall (1996), identity is not something fixed, but continues to be formed through the process of representation and social interaction (Hall, 1996) Surinder's experience shows that Sikh-American identity is built through the constant negotiation between maintaining cultural traditions and the demand to be accepted as part of American society. In this context, the documentary shows that community identity is not born naturally, but is a response to the experience of marginalization experienced by minority groups (Hall, 1997)

Furthermore, the film shows that the Asian-American community builds solidarity through the collective experience of facing racial discrimination. Despite coming from different ethnic backgrounds: Chinese, Japanese, Pakistani, Cambodian, and Sikh, all the speakers showed similar experiences as a group positioned as *outsiders*.

These similarities in experiences shape the collective consciousness that "Asian American" identity is not just a geographical category, but a political identity that develops through shared experiences of facing social exclusion. Lowe (1996) explained that Asian American identity is a political construct that

arises from shared historical experiences in dealing with racism, immigration policies, and social inequality in the United States (Lowe, 1996).

From the perspective of *Critical Race Theory*, the formation of community identity in this documentary can be understood as a form of *counter-narrative*. Delgado (1989) explained that minority groups build alternative narratives to challenge the dominant narrative that has been produced by the majority group (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993).

The stories told by James, June, Brent, Shahid, Surinder, Buntha, Helen, and Meiyang are a form of resistance to stereotypes that portray Asian people as just immigrants, hardworkers, or threats to the country. Instead, the film presents personal experiences as proof that Asian-American identity is shaped through struggle, adaptation, and efforts to gain recognition as equal citizens.

4. Conclusions

The documentary *Being Asians in America* (2022) represents the experience of Asian immigrants in the United States as a complex process of struggle and influenced by race-based power relations. The narrative conveyed through the experiences of Chinese, Japanese, Sikhs, Pakistanis, Cambodians, and other Asian groups shows that migration is not only related to the search for a better life, but also exposes immigrants to various forms of discrimination, stereotypes, violence, language barriers, and inequality in obtaining social and economic opportunities. Through the perspective of *Critical Race Theory*, this study found that the discriminatory practices experienced by the interviewees were not an individual experience, but part of a social structure that reproduces racial injustice against minority groups in the United States.

In addition to showing various forms of marginalization, this documentary also presents a narrative about the ability of Asian immigrants to build adaptation strategies through education, entrepreneurship, community solidarity, and the preservation of cultural identity. The film does not place Asians as passive victims, but as subjects who actively negotiate identity, defend cultural values, and build social spaces that allow them to gain recognition as part of American society.

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