

## CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM IN KARMA BROWN'S NOVEL "RECIPE FOR A PERFECT WIFE"

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### Abstract

In a literary work, two characters can be narrated as the attention center that contains the cultural identity from certain generation. Meanwhile, a symbol actually can cause an interaction within characters. This research discusses about cultural identity and symbolic interactionism reflected in a novel. There is a novel entitled "Recipe for a Perfect Wife" by Karma Brown that tells about two female characters that are represented as a housewife from different generation. This research uses descriptive qualitative as the research methodology and content analysis as the method in analyzing the object of the research, a novel entitled "Recipe for a Perfect Wife". This research also uses the intrinsic approach to analyze the characterization, plot, and setting. This research reveals two kinds of a housewife. They are a housewife and working woman, and a full-housewife. This research finds five cultural identities in the past and present time that is related with a housewife reflected by two female characters in the novel by using cultural identity theory by Stuart Hall. This research also reveals the symbol and memory even three concepts of symbolic interactionism that is mind, self, and society based on symbolic interactionism theory by George Herbert Mead.

**Keywords:** cultural identity, two female characters, housewife, symbolic interactionism.

### INTRODUCTION

Culture is a whole system of ideas, actions, and the work of human beings in order to become a society that human beings belong to learn (Koentjaraningrat, 2015, p. 181). The culture today is far away different from the past time. People live in a modern day and this day cannot be compared with the past decades while everything has to be done manually. The cultural value constitutes cultural identity. Although personal and cultural identity are among the most commonly studied identity components, the interplay and directionality between personal and cultural identity remains understudied (Schwartz et al., 2013; Syed & Juang, 2014). Multicultural values are a process of receiving and appreciating cultural or religion diversity in order to create peace and unity among different human beings. According to Au, Gorski, Nieto & Bode (in Shannon & Baker, 2018:48) that multicultural represents a set of principles, values, and practices directly

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associated with social justice. It encompasses a resolve to inequality, stereotype, and discrimination where it has to provide social justice for all students (Kim, 2020: 89).

Farlina (2008), in her research, uses the cultural identity theory to know how it influences the life of Amir and Hassan in Khaled Hosseini's novel "The Kite Runner". These two novel's characters are Afghanistan-American as their background. Farlina stated in her research that Amir and Hassan had the cultural identity that was stable and could not be changed by anything. Moreover, Wati et. al. (2015), in their article, stated that they focused on cultural identity and cultural dislocation. They explained about the process of cultural identity and cultural dislocation toward immigrant experiences. Their research concluded that Jean Kwok tried to describe immigrants experience cultural identity and cultural dislocation as the impact of doing immigrant. Immigrants who moved from one country to another country had to learn language and culture in order to be accepted by the government. It had Chinese-American as a background. The researches that are conducted by Farlina and Wati et. al used cultural identity and diaspora but this research only focuses on cultural identity. Ika Rizqiyawati, et.al (2020:25) by opening up room for interaction can reduce prejudice, primordialism and in turn create mutual respect. This also implies that diversity can coexist side by side.

According to Blumer (Ritzer & Smart, 2015:429), symbolic interactionism rests on three premises as follows: "First, human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them. Second, the meanings of things derive from social interaction. Third, these meanings are dependednt on, and modified by, an interpretive process of the people who interact with one another".

Amie et. al. (2014) conducted a research about symbolic interactionism in their journal. They used symbolic interactionism theory to describe the symbol and its meaning in the novel entitled "*Biola Tak Berdawai*" by Seno Gumira Ajidarma. The research's result is the symbol implicitly used by Dewa to interact with his mother - Renjani. Aniandhini and partners' research did not describe the three concepts of 'mind', 'self', and 'society'. However, this research explains those three concepts. In other hand, Susilastri (2019), in her journal, conducted a research about symbolic interactionism related with binary opposition. She described the symbols of interaction in the short story called "*Tentang Perempuan (TPT)*". The research's result is that there were some interactions happened in the process of defining symbol mind, self, and society were processed in Mak Atut, the weigh worker "*tukang dacing*", and the society did not show the linier binary opposition.

This research is different with Susilastri's research because it only focuses on symbolic interactionism with the concept of mind, self, and society.

In other hand, according to Siregar, Mead in explaining the symbolic interactionism classifies this theory into three concepts; mind, self, and society (Siregar in Susilastri, 2019, p. 4). 'Mind' is not an object, it is a social process. It refers to the concept that every person experiences a process of thinking in interaction. This process starts when there is a problem or obstacle that blocks one's action to do something. The 'self' concept is about self-description by oneself when does interaction with another person. This oneself points him or her as his or her own object by taking someone else's perspective - values and controls the self-behaviour. Furthermore, the concept of 'society' is defined last. It is seen as an individual external organization which has a relation with the individual internal self-concept. Both of them are relevant to each other. Siregar, in her journal, states that a social relationship net is created, established, and constructed by every person in the society.

In the novel "Recipe for a Perfect Wife" is a literary work by Karma Brown. This novel tells about Alice Hale and Nellie Murdoch that are a housewife from two different eras. Talking about a housewife, there are many perspectives about being a housewife. Some people say that the housewife must not work and treat her husband well. In other hand, some people say that the housewife should support the family financial as well as the husband. In the novel, Brown brings the life of a housewife in 1950s and 2018. Alice lives in the modern lifestyle and decides to become a housewife while Nellie is a housewife herself like a woman used to be in the past decades. What interesting here is a housewife representation in two different generations. (Beaumont in Ozdemir, 2016:3) What is more, motherhood and wifedom continue to be the primary roles for women although women work in a paid job. Ozdemir (2016:4).an analysis of housewifery as limiting women is a one-dimensional analysis because in some cases and for some women, being a housewife can be liberating. Home and housework might be the only fields on which some women have control. Another crucial point is that housewives are not to be seen as subordinated and passive subjects who do not have a say on matters within the family.

#### **METHOD**

The researcher used qualitative method to conduct this research. Specifically, based on the problems that are analyzed, this research uses the descriptive qualitative method. In analyzing the object of the research, a novel entitled "Recipe for a Perfect Wife" by

Karma Brown, the method of content analysis is used in this research. By using this content analysis method, the researcher understands the meaning of the story based on the novel in my interpretation. In other hand, the primary data that the researcher uses in this research are facts and information related to cultural identity and symbolic interactionism taken from the novel entitled "Recipe for a Perfect Wife" by Karma Brown. Meanwhile, the secondary data of this research as the supporting data are facts and information that are relevant with cultural identity and symbolic interactionism gathered from related books, thesis, journals, and articles in the internet.

In this research, the researcher analyze the novel for many times, considering to the important points; the representation of a housewife in the portrait of two female characters from different generation, the cultural values that are reflected by two female characters as the housewife in the novel entitled "Recipe for a Perfect Wife" by Karma Brown that constitute the cultural identity in 2018 and 1950s and the researcher also relates them to the concept of cultural identity and symbolic interactionism. From doing all steps above, the researcher is be able to reveal the cultural identity based on Stuart Hall's theory and also reveal symbolic interactionism theory based on George Herbert Mead in the novel entitled "Recipe for a Perfect Wife".

The individual itself can describe the cultural identity of the specific era by doing his or her activity during the era. The individual is able to show the reader about how people live their life in his or her era. The character itself as an individual can be a proof of cultural value of a community and society existed in the novel. The story in the novel mentions about the community that loves to gather around judging someone's life. The community shows the cultural identity lived in the era by seeing their mannerism. When the society sets a party to celebrate their achievement in charity, this is how people live in that era. Indeed, a novel can portray the cultural values lived in society.

## ***RESEACH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION***

Cultural identity deals with an identity of individual, community, or society for living one's real life. In the context of a novel, a character might reflect the cultural identity. Both Alice Hale and Nellie Murdoch are a housewife. These two female characters in the novel entitled "Recipe for a Perfect Wife" by Karma Brown reflect their own the cultural identity. Alice reflects the cultural identity of housewife in 2018. Meanwhile, Nellie shows the cultural identity in 1950s.

### **1. Cultural Identity in 2018 from Alice's Perspective**

There are five cultural identities in 2018 that are found in Alice's perspective.

a. Smoking is strange

In the story, Alice is said to smoke. There is a reason behind Alice's smoking act. She smokes to release her stress. However, Alice does not want Nate, her husband, knows about her action of smoking. She gets panicked when Nate comes home. She impulsively puts the cigarette inside the water and fans the smoke out. Alice seems so shocked when Nate found out about her smoking. The word 'hysterical' shows that the smoking is a big deal in that era for a woman, especially a wife. Nate gets shocked and tries to ask about it. Alice tries to explain to Nate that she is used to smoke in college. Alice also tries to explain when Sally, her neighbour, catches her smoking. That she tries to give an explanation to Nate and Sally because of her action in smoking shows that smoking is strange for a woman, especially a wife. If smoking is a common thing in that era, there is no need explanation behind the act.

b. Private party

In Alice's era, it is common to host a party to celebrate something. Alice has a farewell party with Bronwyn, her best friend. Alice and Bronwyn host a party just for the two of them. This party can be counted as a farewell party in which Alice moves from Manhattan to Greenville with Nate. Alice and Bronwyn live in the party until they get drunk. It can be said that it is common that a party can be held privately even just two people.

c. Laptop and smartphone

In Alice's era, the technology has been developed. Alice is easy to get in touch with her husband and her friends. She does not wait a few days or weeks to get to know about everyone's life going. Everything in Alice's life is instant. Alice uses laptop in writing her novel. The laptop is one of the evidences that technology has been developed in Alice's era. It proves that people can get easier than the past times when writing something important by using laptop. There is no paper that has to be wasted when people type incorrectly. Back then, people use a typewriter to write something, especially novel. Not only laptop but also smartphone is found in 2018. Alice gets a phone call from Georgia, her ex-boss. She has important thing to tell Alice. Alice also gets a text about the garbage of the house from her husband, Nate. It takes only a second to know the message that Nate tries to deliver. By using a smartphone, message can be uttered and read quickly. It can be said that people

can choose whether they call or they type a message for someone to deliver a message.

d. Living together without marriage

In 2018, living together without marriage is common for American citizens. They can live in one place without a sacred vow named marriage. They are free to live together. It can be seen in Alice's life with Nate Hale. Alice lives together with Nate without marriage. Alice moves in with Nate's apartment when his status is her boyfriend. It means that they are not marriage yet. Alice moves to Nate's place as his girlfriend. Then after six months of living together at Nate's place, he proposes Alice. It proves that they live together first and then they plan to get marriage after that. It can be said that living together without marriage is common in 2018. It is approved by Bronwyn's reaction. She is not shocked with Alice's decision.

e. There is no worker in the house

Alice lives in the house in Greenville alone with Nate. Alice does the household by herself. Alice is helped by Nate in gardening. It can be said that even though they do not hire a worker to take care of their garden, they can work together to take care of it. It can be seen from their action that in 2018, it is not common to hire a worker in the house. People can do the work in the house by themselves independently.

## 2. Cultural Identity in 1950s from Nellie's Perspective

There are five cultural identities in 1950s that are found in Nellie's perspective.

a. Smoking is common

Nellie is said to be smoking in her era, 1950s. She smokes in her daily life and her husband seems fine seeing her smoking in the house. Indeed, Nellie is smoking, but her husband does not show that he is offended about the fact that Nellie is smoking. Otherwise, Richard, her husband, suggests Nellie to choose the filtered cigarette. He only suggests but not warns her. It shows that smoking for a woman, especially the wife, is common in such those days. It can be said that the fact about the woman is smoking shows the cultural identity.

b. Tupperware party

Nellie, in her era, attends Tupperware party. Tupperware party is attended by the circle of friends around the neighbourhood to promote the Tupperware brand. It is like the usual event. Nellie attends the Tupperware party in her neighbour's house. In the story, Nellie mentions about Tupperware party that is held in Kitty's house. It can be seen that Tupperware party is common in Nellie's era, 1950s. This

kind of party invites people to gather around in the society in selling the brand of Tupperware.

c. Letter

In Nellie's life, the technology has not been developed in advance. Nellie does everything in her era in traditional way. There are no laptops or smartphones that can be used by Nellie in the house. Everything is done without the help of technology. In the novel, Nellie writes a letter to give a message to her mother. In fact, her mother lives separated from Nellie since she is married to Richard Murdoch. Nellie writes a letter to deliver the message that she has a recipe that she wants to share with her mother. There is no smartphone to help Nellie to get instant response. Nellie seems needing to wait her mother's response to her letter several days by using the letter as a passenger. It proves that the letter is familiar for those who want to deliver a message in Nellie's era.

d. Young marriage

Nellie is married to Richard in such a young age. In her twenties, she has the commitment with Richard as a married couple. Nellie commits with Richard in marriage in such a young age. She is married in the age of twenty-one. Twenty-one can be counted as young age. It is also narrated in the story that many women are married in a young age. From Nellie's perspective, it also mentions that many women in the same age as Nellie are married in young age, gets pregnant, and have children.

e. Hiring a worker

Nellie is a full-housewife. She does the household in the house. However, she still has a worker that helps her in doing the household. Her husband, Richard, is the one who hires the worker. Helen is the worker that helps Alice does the household. They call her as their girl. The term of 'the girl' refers to the worker. Helen helps Nellie doing the dishes. She is paid to help Nellie in doing the household so that she can earn money. It can be seen that the Murdochs hire a worker to help the wife in doing the household.

This research finds not only cultural identities but also symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism, in this context, has two aspects. First is about the symbol itself that can cause an interaction bringing a memory reflected in Alice's perspective. Second is about the concept of mind, self, and society reflected in Nellie's perspective.

## **1. Symbol and Memory in Alice's Perspective**

Symbol is believed that it is not the matter of words, but the matter of memory towards objects or words that represents something. A symbol can cause interaction within the character. This symbol of the story is about a cookie. This cookie is baked by Alice following the recipe that she finds in her basement of the house. There is an interaction within two characters, Alice and Sally. Sally eats the cookie that is baked by Alice. While eating the cookie, Sally tells Alice that the cookie tastes the same as what her mother, Miriam, always bakes for her. Miriam is the neighbor of Nellie Murdoch. In other hand, Alice responses to Sally's statement that the cookie is baked based on the recipe that she finds in the basement of her house in Greenville. The Greenville house is the house of Nellie Murdoch herself back then. The recipe itself has a written name of Elsie Swann. The cookie is the object that brings the conversation between Alice and Sally. It can be said that the cookie is seen as a symbol, a symbol that causes an interaction. The symbol of the interaction is cookie. The cookie itself makes Sally memorize about her mother's cookie. Sally memorizes her mother's statement that homemade cuisine always wins. She also assumes about the cookbook that belongs to Nellie. The cookbook is like a legacy that has to be maintained from one generation to generation. It is assumed that the cookbook is given by Elsie to Nellie.

The cookie is the symbol of the interaction within Alice and Sally. First, the cookie brings Sally's memory to her mother's cookie. Second, the cookie brings the topic of the cookbook up. Because of the cookie they have a conversation about the cookbook that Alice finds in the basement. The cookie makes Sally memorize about the name of Elsie Swann. She believes that Elsie is Nellie's mother. The assumption about Elsie also brings them to the topic of the cookbook that is as a legacy that has to be delivered to the next generation. It also brings the fact that the new wives in the era of 1950s are still unprepared to a marriage. From the explanation above, it can be concluded that a symbol can be the reason that the character has an interaction one another. Alice and Sally do the communication.

## **2. The Concept of Mind, Self, and Society in Nellie's Perspective**

Symbolic interactionism can be classified into three concepts; mind, self, and society. The concept of mind deals with a process of thinking in interaction in which one experiences. Nellie represents the concept of mind, self, and society that can be seen in the story. This concept is applied when Richard is abusive to Nellie and it is seen by Miriam, their neighbour.



The concept of mind is Nellie must leave Richard Murdoch because he is abusive. Observing the action of Richard, it is worth enough to leave Richard. There is no one who wants to live with a husband that is abusive. This abusive action of the husband leaves a mark in the body of the wife. Nellie, as the wife, has one thing that she has to do with Richard; leaving him. Nellie is assumed to have a thought in leaving Richard. She admits that Richard is not a good man. It can be concluded that she knows she must leave Richard because of his abusiveness and cruelty. Her mind tells her to leave her husband. So, the concept of mind in Nellie's perspective is leaving Richard because he is abusive. Richard hurts Nellie, his own wife.

The concept of self is that Nellie survives to be the wife of Richard Murdoch. Even though her mind - the concept of mind - tells her to leave Richard, she still brings herself together to stay with Richard as his wife. The self of Nellie decides to accept what Richard does to her. She still respects her husband. She does not fight back when Richard hurts her. Nellie just protects herself from Richard's harm. She does not keep on the concept of mind. Otherwise, she decides to do what is right based on the self. The right thing based on Nellie is surviving as Richard's wife. Nellie states that Richard is her husband after all. It is assumed by Nellie's behavior that she chooses to stay when there is an option to leave. It can be said that the self of Nellie makes her stay still with her husband, Richard Murdoch.

The concept of society is reflected in Miriam. Miriam can be seen as a society. She is from the outside of Richard and Nellie. Miriam is Nellie and Richard's neighbor. Her house is near the Murdoch's house. Miriam accidentally sees what Richard does to Nellie. That is why Miriam suggests Nellie to leave her husband. Miriam admits that Richard is not a good man at all by seeing his action to Nellie and does not deserve Nellie. She is the one that witnesses Richard's abusiveness in the Murdoch's garden. Miriam's opinion can be counted as society's opinion. She states her mind about Nellie leaving Richard. It is assumed that in the eye of society reflected in Miriam character, Richard is not a good man for Nellie. As a society, Miriam tells Nellie that she should leave Richard.

## CONCLUSION

After analyzing a novel entitled "Recipe for a Perfect Wife" by Karma Brown through the theory of cultural identity and symbolic interactionism, it can be concluded that the novel reveals five cultural identities in 2018 and 1950s, and analyzes symbolic interactionism reflected in two female characters, Alice Hale and Nellie Murdoch. Based on the research findings, it proves that culture is different from one to another generation. It reveals that there are the different cultures between two eras that constitute the cultural identity. These different cultures constitute the cultural identity. Every generation have different social interactions experienced and shaped their own behavior. This cultural identity shows different in each era and can be narrated in the story. The cultural identity also can be seen in individual part in the story in which it represents the community or even society. In other hand, there is a relation between symbol and memory. The symbol might bring the memory of something or someone. It is also found about three concepts in symbolic interactionism - mind, self, and society - in the portrait of one's character in this novel.

The researchers who are interested in doing the same research particularly concerning about cultural identity and symbolic interactionism in literary works, it needs to read more various theory to get more wide knowledge and deep analysis. In spite of, the researcher realizes that this research is far from perfection so it needs improvement and some corrections are necessary in order to accomplish better analysis.

This research study is relating to the education in modern era where there are two kinds of housewife representation reflected in two female characters, Alice Hale and Nellie Murdoch. Alice lives in 2018 when technology gets developed more and the moral value reflected in this modern era.

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