

ACCEPTANCE IN THE GREATEST SHOWMAN: A TEXTUAL READING OF THE FILM USING LITERARY SOCIOLOGY THEORY

Gadya Fidyah Utami; Dr. Nurhidayat, S.Pd.,
M.Pd.

Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, FKIP,
Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta

Abstract

Penelitian ini mengkaji penggambaran identitas dan inklusi dalam film *The Greatest Showman* (2017) dengan menggunakan metodologi penelitian kualitatif yang mencakup analisis tekstual dan tematik. Film ini terinspirasi oleh kisah hidup P.T. Barnum dan menampilkan beragam karakter yang berjuang melawan marginalisasi yang mereka alami di tengah masyarakat. Meskipun film ini menyuguhkan alur cerita yang menghibur dan menyampaikan pesan-pesan positif, film ini juga menuai kritik karena dianggap menyajikan isu mengenai kelompok masyarakat yang terpinggirkan dengan cara yang terlalu sederhana. Makalah penelitian ini akan mengkaji film tersebut melalui penayangan langsung serta tinjauan terhadap sumber-sumber akademis guna mendalami tema identitas, keberagaman, dan implikasinya bagi masyarakat modern. Makalah penelitian ini memiliki beberapa keterbatasan yang perlu disebutkan di bagian ini, seperti fokus pada satu film saja, variasi dalam penafsiran film, potensi adanya bias dalam analisis, serta fakta bahwa latar belakang budaya dan sejarah film tersebut tidak serta-merta mencerminkan situasi masa kini. Sebagai penutup, makalah penelitian ini berfokus pada pengaruh film tersebut terhadap persepsi masyarakat mengenai isu identitas dan keberagaman.

Kata Kunci: Penerimaan, Pembacaan Tekstual, Teori Sosiologi Sastra

Abstract

This research examines the portrayal of identity and inclusion in the movie *The Greatest Showman* (2017) by using the qualitative research methodology involving textual and thematic analyses. The movie is inspired by the life of P.T. Barnum and includes a diverse range of characters that struggle against the marginalization they are experiencing in society. While the movie features an entertaining plot and delivers positive messages, it is criticized for presenting the issues of the marginalized people in too simple a manner. This research paper will examine the movie by watching it directly and reviewing academic sources to find out more about the themes of identity, diversity, and their implications for modern society. The research paper has some limitations that should be mentioned in this section, such as focusing on a single movie, variable interpretation of the film, possible presence of biases in the analysis, and the fact that the cultural and historical background of the movie does not necessarily reflect today's situation. To conclude, this research paper focuses on the influence of the movie on the perception of societal issues of identity and diversity.

Keywords: Acceptance, Textual Reading, Literary Sociology Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

The "Greatest Showman" is the name of a musical movie made by Michael Gracey in 2017. This is the story of a man named P.T. Barnum, a person who became the founder of the modern circus. The movie uses the biography of this person. There are some characters in the movie

who can be characterized as marginalized owing to various physical traits of theirs: a singer with a large body, a bearded woman, and so on. The fight of those characters to be recognized in a discriminating society is reflected in the plot of the movie.

This study aims to investigate the representation of the theme of acceptance in this film using a sociological theory of literature approach. This theory will help identify how social and cultural contexts influence the portrayal of characters and their interactions. By analyzing the narrative elements and characteristics of the film, it is hoped that this study can deepen our understanding of the characters' journey towards self-acceptance and acceptance by others.

2. METHOD

Data collection for this study was conducted using documentary and textual analysis methods, comprising several systematic steps:

a. Repeated Film Viewing

The researcher watched *The Greatest Showman* multiple times to fully understand its narrative, emotional depth, and thematic elements related to acceptance.

b. Identifying Important Scenes and Dialogues

During these viewings, key scenes, important dialogues, and songs that highlight the theme of acceptance were carefully identified. This selection process ensured that critical moments showcasing the struggles of marginalized characters were highlighted.

c. Note-Taking and Documentation

Key scenes and dialogues were documented in detail. This included writing down significant lines and capturing screenshots of important visual moments that reflect the theme of acceptance. These notes served as vital reference points for analysis.

d. Reviewing Academic Literature

The researcher conducted an extensive review of existing scholarly articles and studies related to the themes of acceptance and diversity in the film. This literature review provided a broader context for understanding the social implications conveyed in *The Greatest Showman*.

e. Thematic Analysis

The collected data organized into themes, focusing on how each element represent acceptance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

The analysis of the text and themes in *The Greatest Showman* reveals that there is a complex representation of acceptance within the story which changes from commodification to true acceptance. Using the results from the sociogram analysis of characters' relations, the results are grouped into three main aspects of acceptance: self-acceptance, group acceptance, and conditional acceptance.

1. Self-Acceptance: Identity Reclamation and Dignity

The movie shows how acceptance of oneself is manifested through the internal struggle of the performers who feel excluded from the society such as Lettie Lutz (the Bearded Lady), Tom Thumb, and Anne Wheeler. To begin with, being labeled as unfit is what characterizes the characters as judged, hidden, and embarrassed. Yet the involvement of the characters in the circus allows them to move from concealment to assertion.

The song "This Is Me" plays an important role in this regard as it is the main event that changes everything. In terms of the sociogram, it manifests itself in the way the inner cluster network is created by the characters through the solid bidirectional arrows symbolizing respect and dignity towards each other. The acceptance of oneself is the basis that allows the performers to withstand the external rejection from the society.

2. Social Acceptance: Transcending Boundaries and Seeking Belonging

Social acceptance in the movie works on two separate fronts: the pursuit of social status from the upper classes and the development of real cross-class/cross-racial relationships.

a) Phillip Carlyle and Anne Wheeler: Phillip's story shows the contradiction between what is expected from him socially and what truly belongs to him. His relationship with Anne Wheeler overcomes the constraints of class and race. Even though the first meeting between Phillip and Anne is characterized by embarrassment because of strong social stigma (represented by dashed lines in the sociogram), Phillip's decision to quit his upper class life for the sake of the circus demonstrates strong bidirectional connection and hence social acceptance.

b) Charity Barnum: Charity demonstrates relational acceptance, which is based on self-respect rather than social respect. Being out of the circle of social pressure coming from high society despite her belonging to that class, she shows a real emotional security in interacting

with Barnum.

3. Conditional Acceptance: Power Dynamics and Capitalist Inclusion

The findings reveal a critical tension between genuine inclusion and conditional acceptance, centered around P.T. Barnum.

P.T. Barnum's Trajectory: Barnum's initial recruitment of the misfits stems from transactional motives. Represented in the sociogram by dashed directional arrows, his relationship with the performers initially operates on a utility basis: he offers them a stage to achieve his own dream of financial success and high-society recognition. His desire to impress the elite leads to actions of exclusion, such as barring the circus performers from high-society receptions. His arc matures only when he recognizes that true value lies in his circus family rather than external class validation.

Jenny Lind: Jenny Lind's placement on the sociogram perimeter illustrates the fragility of mainstream external validation. Connected primarily through a monodirectional arrow to Barnum, her acceptance by the elite is conditional upon her performance and adherence to their standards, leaving her isolated despite her prestige.

Discussion

The sociometric and textual findings demonstrate that *The Greatest Showman* functions as a contemporary allegory for systemic inclusion, diversity, and marginalization. Analyzing these results through the lens of literary sociology reveals several critical theoretical insights.

1. The Mechanics of Inclusion: From Tokenism to Authentic Valuation

The first encounter between Barnum and the performers demonstrates the sociological phenomenon of tokenism. In contemporary society, inclusion is done superficially because, even if minorities are given access to places, they are not given the power to make decisions or be dignified members of society. Barnum capitalizes on the uniqueness of the performers in order for him to have cultural capital in high-class society.

2. Collective Solidarity as a Protection from Structural Rejection

The close-knit community of the circus performers clearly shows that self-acceptance is not a lonely endeavor but rather a collective one. The performers create an alternative social network amid their rejection by society. With peer support, they are able to transform their sense of shame into collective strength. This happens in accordance with sociological processes that take place in reality, when ostracized communities create safe havens and an anthem such as "This Is Me" for themselves.

3. Deconstruction of Privilege and Genuine Allyship

The journey of Phillip Carlyle is a vital template for deconstructing privilege. Acceptance and inclusion will only happen when the dominant social group gives up their unearned social privileges. From an observer to a partner in the circus, the journey of Phillip shows how being a true ally necessitates taking the necessary risks in order to destroy these systems of inequality. This story shows that social cohesion is not dependent on just the strength of the oppressed but on the readiness of the privileged to transcend class structures.

4. Grounded Worth vs. Institutional Meritocracy

Finally, contrasting Charity Barnum's grounded self-worth with Jenny Lind's reliance on institutional validation offers a critique of hyper-meritocratic societies. Mainstream social acceptance often treats individuals as conditional, revocable assets. Charity's role as an emotional anchor demonstrates that psychological safety and genuine belonging occur when human dignity is treated as inherent, rather than contingent upon continuous performance or external applause.

4. CLOSING

The Greatest Showman serves as a powerful narrative exploring the theme of acceptance through the journeys of marginalized characters. The film intricately weaves together personal struggles for self-acceptance and societal recognition, illustrating the complexities of identity and diversity. The song "This Is Me" acts as a poignant anthem for self-acceptance, celebrating uniqueness while addressing the challenges posed by societal prejudice. The film also presents a critical lens on conditional acceptance, particularly through the character of P.T. Barnum, whose acceptance often hinges on the commodification of individual talents. This dynamic raises important ethical questions regarding the authenticity of relationships formed under such conditions. In reflecting contemporary societal issues, The Greatest Showman acts as both an inspirational tale and a cautionary reflection on the complexities of acceptance in a world fraught with discrimination and exclusion. The film encourages viewers to engage in deeper discussions about inclusion and representation, reminding us of the ongoing struggles faced by many individuals today.

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