



**ASSIMILATION BETWEEN TWO GENERATIONS OF CHICANO
IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES IN A *BETTER LIFE* MOVIE**

A JOURNAL

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ABSTRACT

Dalam masyarakat majemuk pasti ada keberagaman budaya. Namun untuk hidup dan bertahan di dalamnya bukanlah hal yang mudah. Mereka yang termasuk dalam kelompok minoritas dituntut untuk mengadopsi budaya-budaya yang dimiliki kelompok mayoritas. Proses ini disebut dengan asimilasi. Hal ini dilakukan dengan tujuan agar mereka dapat diterima dan mendapat perlakuan dan kesempatan yang sama dengan kelompok mayoritas. Sebagian dari mereka dengan sukarela mengasimilasi budaya-budaya baru dan sebagian lagi sebaliknya. Mereka tetap berpegang pada budaya mereka dan enggan untuk mengadopsi budaya dari kelompok mayoritas seperti yang terjadi pada sebagian besar etnik *Chicano*. Namun, setiap orang memiliki tingkatan yang berbeda dalam mengadopsi budaya tersebut. Proses asimilasi tersebut dapat direfleksikan dalam karya sastra, salah satunya melalui sebuah film. *A Better Life* adalah sebuah film yang mencoba untuk mendeskripsikan tentang hidup seorang ilegal imigran asal Meksiko dan seorang anaknya di tengah-tengah masyarakat Amerika Serikat. Di dalam film ini, digambarkan bagaimana perbedaan asimilasi yang dialami oleh dua generasi yang berbeda.

Tujuan penulisan skripsi ini adalah untuk mengetahui adanya perbedaan tingkatan dalam proses asimilasi yang dialami oleh dua generasi *Chicano* yang berbeda. Metode yang digunakan adalah penelitian pustaka dengan pendekatan sosiologi. Penulis mengaplikasikan teori asimilasi dalam menganalisis film.

Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa secara umum, generasi kedua lebih terasimilasi dari pada generasi pertama seperti yang digambarkan dalam film *A Better Life*. Terdapat perbedaan tingkatan yang tipis di dalam beberapa sub proses asimilasi yang dialami generasi pertama dan kedua. Perbedaan tersebut terjadi pada sub proses asimilasi budaya dan asimilasi struktural sekunder yang mengacu pada pencapaian dalam pekerjaan dan pendidikan. Selain itu, terdapat persamaan dalam sub proses asimilasi struktural primer, yaitu asimilasi yang mengacu pada kontak sosial dalam masyarakat. Hal ini disebabkan oleh tingginya kekeluargaan yang dimiliki etnik *Chicano* yang menjaga keeratatan hubungan sosial di antara mereka.

Kata kunci: assimilation, A Better Life, Chicanos, culture, immigrants

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Historically, Chicanos did not originally become a part of American society through voluntary immigration. The same way as American Indians, they had experienced a direct conquest of their homeland by Anglo Americans. Sanchez in McLemore states that the Spanish Mexicans of the Southwest are not truly an immigrant group, for they are in their traditional home (1983:209).

Since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ceded half of the Mexico territory to the United States was signed in February 1848, few Mexicans moved to the United States with the intention of becoming permanent residents. During the first decade of twentieth century, a great immigration of Mexicans occurred either legally or illegally in search of work and better life. Little concern about the Chicanos immigration and unrestrictive policy in the borderland gave occasion to the immigrants to move back and forth easily and continuously.

In their life as immigrants in the new society, Chicanos experience several assimilations. H. Bash in Richard T. Scafer's book *Racial and Ethnic Groups* states "assimilation is the process by which a subordinate individual or group takes on the characteristics on the dominant group and is eventually accepted as part of that group" (2000:28). However, assimilation does not occur at the same pace for all groups and for all individuals in the same group. The second generation is probably more assimilated than the first generation. In other words, every generation has each level of being assimilated.

1.2. Scope of the Study

To limit the object of discussion, the writer focuses on the assimilation as experienced by two generations of Chicano immigrants in the United States society as reflected in *A Better Life* movie.

1.3. Aims of the Study

The primary objective in writing this thesis is to reveal whether or not there are any differences in assimilation experienced by two generations of Chicano immigrants through how they live in the United States society as reflected in *A Better Life* movie. Besides, the writer also describes the intrinsic aspects in *A Better Life* movie together with the cinematography aspects

1.4. Method of the Study

1.4.1. Method of Research

In writing this thesis, the writer applies library research as a type of research in which the writer obtains the data by watching the movie and reading the script of the movie, reading the reference books connected to the object under study and browsing the data related in the internet.

1.4.2. Method of Approach

To analyze the problem, the writer applies exponential and sociological approach. Exponential approach focuses on several intrinsic aspects in a literary work. Meanwhile, in analyzing the extrinsic aspects, the writer applies sociological approach. The sociological approach can be defined as the relation between literature and society.

SUMMARY OF THE MOVIE

A Better Life is an American movie released in 2011, directed by Chris Weitz. The movie tells about the life of two generations of Chicano immigrants named Carlos and his son, Luis. The plot develops when Carlos's truck was stolen by his new work partner in the first day of work. The journey in getting back the truck makes their relation better than before considering that Luis is bitter about his mother who has abandoned them.

Luis is hard to commit to his education though he does not wish to follow his father's footsteps. Luis is often absent from the school and interested in joining the gang. Carlos works as a gardener with his friend named Blasco who is going to return to Mexico. He continually persuades Carlos to buy his truck. Carlos is thinking all night long how to get the money to purchase the truck. Finally he affords to buy the truck after he borrows some money from her sister Anita.

Unfortunately, on the first day, his partner, Santiago steals his truck. The next day, Luis comes with his father looking for Santiago. First, they go to the South Central apartment where Santiago lives. Unfortunately, when they come there, Santiago has moved just one day before. Then, they are directly heading to the nightclub. However, the club is still closed so they decide to wait. While waiting the club to open at night, Carlos asks Luis to come to *Charreada* festival and watch rodeo while. There Carlos asks his son's feelings about their culture.

When the nightclub opens, by a permission of the guard, Carlos comes in and finds Santiago washing dishes. Santiago who is shocked to see Carlos run away, but Luis who is waiting outside tackles him. Luis slaps him around but

Carlos pulls Luis away. Then, Carlos finds a bill in which Santiago has sold the truck and sent the money to his family in El Salvador. The next morning, they find the garage where Santiago has sold the truck and they finally succeed in stealing it back. On their way home, they are pulled over by the police, and Carlos is arrested and imprisoned as an illegal immigrant because he cannot show his driving license. Carlos is quickly processed, and Luis gets to the prison just before Carlos is about to board a deportation bus. The film ends with Luis playing football with his aunt and his two cousins watching him play. Meanwhile, in another place, Carlos is about to go into the desert with other illegal immigrants and they all are going to go home.

LITERARY REVIEW

3.1. Intrinsic Aspects

3.1.1. Narrative Elements

3.1.1.1. Character

Character explains the figures who are involved in the story. Character is divided into major character and minor character. Major character is the key that brings the main conflict in the story (Pooley, 1968:538). Meanwhile, minor character is supporting character which supports the story and helps the major character.

3.1.1.2. Setting

Meyer in his book, *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, says that setting is the context in which the action of a story occurs (1990:107). There are three

major elements of setting which establish the world in which the characters act; these are, the time, place and social environment.

3.1.1.3. Conflict

Conflict is one thing that certainly appears to develop the story in a literary work. According to Meyer, conflict is divided into two kinds (1990:45); these are internal conflict and external conflict.

3.2. Extrinsic Aspects

3.2.1. Assimilation theory

As quoted in Scafer's *Racial and Ethnic Groups*, according to Milton Gordon, assimilation is a majority ideology in which A plus B plus C equal A: "The majority (A) dominates in such a way that the minorities (B and C), regardless of how many racial, ethnic, or religious groups are involved, become indistinguishable from the dominant group (Scafer, 2000:28). Assimilation refers to the process by which a culturally distinct group adopts the language, values, and norms of a larger society. On the other side, though in assimilation the minorities adopt the culture of the majority, they keep their original culture so that they do not completely lose their own culture. Lin states that,

Although academics define assimilation as the manner in which immigrants blend into larger societies, they also acknowledge that, in a normative sense, assimilation is linked to an expectation that foreigners will shed, or at least contain, their native cultures while embracing the mores and languages of the host country (2002:91).

However, assimilation does not occur at the same pace for all groups and for all individuals in the same group.

3.2.2. Chicanos Assimilation

McLemore in his book *Racial and Ethnic Relations in America* assumes that each generation should be more assimilated than the preceding one (1983:238). As proposed by Milton Gordon, he also states the main sub processes of assimilation as experienced by Chicanos which are divided into four parts, these are, cultural assimilation, secondary structural assimilation, primary structural assimilation, and marital assimilation. However, the writer decides to use only three of them, these are:

3.2.2.1. Cultural Assimilation

Cultural Assimilation includes assimilation in language and culture. Gebler, Moore, and Guzman in McLemore say that Chicanos have retained the Spanish language. The Chicanos, so far, have not followed the Anglo-conformity pattern of cultural assimilation by substituting English for Spanish. Chicanos seems to be more having cultural assimilation by addition than by substitution.

3.2.2.2. Secondary Structural Assimilation

This sub process of assimilation refers to occupation and educational attainment. After World War II, the Chicanos moved rapidly out of the lowest prestige jobs into higher prestige jobs (McLemore, 1983:224). Although many Chicanos have been changed to the more prestige jobs, they work with lower-paid positions. In educational aspect, Chicanos are continually assimilated across generations.

3.2.2.3. Primary Structural Assimilation

This refers to the social and neighborhood life. How far Chicanos become assimilated depends on the kind of neighborhood they live either in segregated or

desegregated area. Based on a research of UCLA's Mexican American Study Project, in Los Angeles, the Chicanos who lived in neighborhoods having relatively few Chicanos were more likely to have predominantly Anglo friends than were those living in a neighborhood having a relatively large number of Chicanos (McLemore, 1983:249).

DISCUSSION

4.1. Intrinsic Aspects

4.1.1. Characters

4.1.1.1. Major Characters

There are two major characters which appear in this movie:

- Carlos



Carlos is an illegal immigrant who lives in Los Angeles with his son named Luis. He is kind of father who really cares about his son. He tries to keep his son away from drugs, gangs, and any negative things which are close to Chicano teenagers in general.

- Luis



Luis is Carlos's son. He is a disobedient boy. Since he has a close relation with his girlfriend's family especially with her uncle who is a gang leader, he often gets suspended as the consequence of making problems in his school.

4.1.1.2 Minor Characters

- Blasco



Blasco is Carlos's work partner. He is an enthusiastic person. He recruits Carlos to work with him as a gardener. One day, however, he is going to return to Mexico after getting enough money from gardening so he decides to sell his truck.

- Aunt Anita



She is Carlos's sister who also lives in Los Angeles. Different from Carlos, her life is slightly better than his because she has been registered as a legal resident. As the only relative in Los Angeles, she is also the one who gets responsibility and is willing to take care of Luis after Carlos has been deported.

4.1.2. Setting

4.1.2.1. Setting of Place

- Los Angeles; the city has a large number of Chicano populations. Carlos and Luis live in a Chicano neighborhood.
- *Charreada* festival; It is a Mexican festival where Carlos and Luis stop off there when they are looking for Santiago who has stolen their truck.
- South Central Apartment, is a district in Los Angeles which the neighborhood is famous for riots, gang violence, and poverty.

- **Setting of Time**

There is no obvious set of time which appears in the movie. The story of this movie might be taken in the recent time about in 2000s. It can be seen from the beginning of the movie which shows the ads on television about mansion sales in Beverly Hills, California. Property sale such as mansion and sport cars is popular at that time.

- **Setting of Environment**

Social condition which is revealed in *A Better Life* movie is a lower class society, especially of illegal immigrants.

4.1.3. Conflicts

1. Internal conflict

Internal conflict in this movie happens to Carlos. Carlos has through a difficult situation after being abandoned by his wife. He is in anger to knowing that he does not have anything to do. He has no decisive job. On the other hand, he has to take care of Luis alone in a condition that he never expected before.

2. External conflicts

It happens between Carlos and Luis. Luis forbids his father to give some money to Jesus, the man who leads them the way to the apartment, because he does not take them to Santiago.

4.2. Extrinsic Aspects

4.2.1. Chicanos Assimilation

4.2.1.1. Cultural Assimilation between Carlos and Luis

Assimilation is a process which minority groups adopt the cultures of the majority without eliminating their origin cultures as the minority ones. As written on Chapter III, according to McLemore, each generation should be more

assimilated than the preceding one. Cultural assimilation includes language and culture. In language aspect, Luis as the second Chicano generation is always and prefers to speak English than Spanish either with his father in home or his friends in school. Sometimes, however, Luis speaks English with some words of Spanish language.



Luis : What's that fool been trying to say?
Carlos : Tu entiendes Espanol. Intentalo. Trying!
Luis : He's talking about jumping horses is dangerous and it's brave.
(A Better Life, 2nd disc, 00: 05: 31 – 00: 05: 58)

The Chicanos, so far, have not followed the Anglo conformity pattern of cultural assimilation by substituting English for Spanish. Therefore, the cultural assimilation experienced by Chicanos is the assimilation by addition, adding the new one and keeping the old one. Luis asks his father what the speaker says, because he speaks in Spanish. Carlos asks him in Spanish language to try to understand it. He believes that his son is still able to understand his origin language. Even though Luis hesitantly guesses what that means, but he is finally able to understand it. Chicanos prefer to use Spanish in conversations with their children. So does Carlos. He prefers to speak with Luis in Spanish.

One scene in the movie shows that Luis is not considered his own culture as a Chicano when he and his father come to a Chicano festival named *Charreada* festival.



Luis : Where these people think they're at? Some Halloween party or something?

Carlos : This is I'm coming from. This is your people too. Charro. They're you.

Luis : They ain't me.

Carlos : Really? I'll get you a hat and some boots and we'll see.

(A Better Life, 2nd disc, 00: 04: 36 – 00: 04: 53)

From the dialogue above, it can be concluded that it is the first time for Luis to come to a Chicano festival, as a Chicano descent of natives' parentage. He does not even know what the festival is, but conversely he instead assumes that it is a Halloween party. He thinks that the people are strange by using such kind of clothes. Moreover, he also denies his father if he belongs to kind of them. Luis knows and prefers to the majority culture, in this case is Anglo American more than his own culture.

4.2.2.2 Secondary Structural Assimilation between Carlos and Luis

In the movie, it can be seen that differs from many Chicanos who have succeeded in pursuing the more prestige occupation, in which means that they have been occupationally assimilated, Carlos still works as a gardener. He also keeps using Chicanos traditional technique in gardening. It is a skill that he got in his homeland, Mexico. It becomes the only job that he can do for earn money after he moves to the United States though it is fully risky job.

On the other hand, Luis as the second generation is more assimilated in his secondary structural aspect of educational attainments. Luis attends to public

school which the students are from many different ethnics, including the majority, the Anglo American. There are some supposedly reasons why he attends to public school rather than to private school. First, public school is free. As an illegal immigrant, his father must have not enough money to send Luis to private school. Thus, it is the way for people from working class and low class like Carlos to be able to get an education for his son by sending him to the public school. Besides, it is expected to be a place where he has opportunity to having relationship more with his friends from other ethnics.

4.2.2.3. Primary Structural Assimilation between Carlos and Luis

The kind of environment and society where Chicanos live becomes the factor that determines how far they are being assimilated. Living in a neighborhood having a relatively large number of Chicanos, either Carlos or Luis is more likely having social contact to the people in their ethnic.



Although Luis attends to the public school which is basically expected that he will have opportunities to have some relationships with his friends from other ethnics, it can not be ensuring that he will be easily assimilated. Luis is more likely close to his Chicano friends like Facundo and Ruthie. His preference in having social relationship with Chicanos also can be seen through how he interacts with the people outside his school. He occasionally visits Ruthie's house. He is also close to Ruthie's uncle named Celso. As the result of unwillingness in

having some relationship with the others, it will take longer time for him to be assimilated in his primary structural assimilation.

Another thing that probably make Chicanos are unwilling to be assimilated is bad treatment and prejudice from American. For example, it happens when doing an investigation to for making a trouble with his friend in school, the cop forces him to take his shirt off in order to take a photo of his tattoos whereas he have nothing. The cop considers him like most Chicano boys who are gangster and always have tattoos in their body.

Likewise, Carlos has a good social relationship with the people among his ethnic group. When Carlos and Luis are looking for Santiago in South Central apartment, they meet a man who helps them by telling the information about Santiago. He returns a phone cell that Santiago had stolen to Carlos without receive the money Carlos is going to give him eventhough he has bought it for 40 dollars from Santiago.

CONCLUSION

From analysis on some scenes of the movie, it can be conclude that there is slight different level of assimilation between the characters, Carlos and Luis. Generally, Luis as the second generation is more assimilated to the Anglo conformity than Carlos as the first generation. In cultural aspect, Luis is more assimilated than Carlos. Moreover, it can be said that he begins to omit his cultural identity by not considering himself as a Chicano. In language usage, however, both are bilingual, they keep speaking in Spanish and do not substitute Spanish to English though Luis prefers to speak in English.

In secondary structural assimilation, Luis also has higher level of assimilation by attending to public school while Carlos works like many other traditional Chicano workers of a lower class group. On the other hand, either Luis or Carlos has the same level in primary structural assimilation. As the result of living in a neighborhood having a relatively large number of Chicanos, both have a close social relation to other Chicanos and prefer gathering with them.

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