

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

The United States has been known for being the land of opportunity (Mullin 2017). The statement, which people refer to as “The American Dream”, means that everyone shall be able to achieve the highest stature and be perceived by others for what they are, no matter who they are and where they came from (Adams 1931). Thus, people come from around the world to the United States with the hope of a better and happier life, resulting in the United States society being culturally diverse. To describe the heterogeneous society in America, the term ‘melting pot’, which refers to how different cultures assimilate and become more homogeneous, is used (Crossman 2021). However, the term is often challenged by people who suggest that ethnic groups retain their distinctiveness when being put in a bigger society, the concept that is usually referred to as the “Salad Bowl” (Jacoby 2004). Nevertheless, the diversity in American culture could not be denied.

For years, millions of people around the globe have been immigrating to the United States. In 2018, one in seven United States residents is an immigrant, which means that around 44.7 million of The United States population are originated from outside of the United States (American Immigration Council 2020). Most of the time, those immigrants initially came to the United States to

work or to study before deciding to reside there permanently (Pimienti and Polkey 2019). In 2019, more than 800,000 immigrants were applying for naturalization so that they are able to legally become a citizen of the United States (Teke 2020). According to the data by Pew Research Center, most of those immigrants were coming from Mexico, which comprised  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the total Immigrants in the United States, followed by China and India (Budiman 2020).

However, being culturally diverse does not mean that the United States is a land free of discrimination toward those cultures. Discrimination is an unfair treatment of people and/or groups based on their attributes such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and more (American Psychological Association 2019). In 2021, Andrew Daniller of *Pew Research Center* did research regarding Americans' view of discrimination that happens towards certain groups in their society. He concluded that the majority of the respondents agree that there are at least some discriminations against several racial groups in the United States which include Black, Hispanic, and Asian (Daniller 2021). As minorities, they are often discriminated against by the dominant group which is the White. A person is considered as White if they are "having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa." (United States Census Bureau 2019). In the survey which was conducted in 2019, they concluded that from around 320 million of their population, 60.1% identified themselves as White alone, not Hispanic or Latino (United States Census Bureau 2019).

Hispanic, who is described as people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race

(United States Census Bureau 2019), is one of the groups that received discriminatory acts in the United States. One of the discriminations received by Hispanics is in a form of negative stereotyping. Most of the time, Hispanics are regarded as a certain image that is not always true. One of the images is that they are labeled as “Illegal Alien” because they are being accused of living in the United States without having any legal permission to live there (Warner 2006).

Discriminatory attitudes toward a particular group that belongs to a certain geographical, racial, or gender, and done by another group that believes their group is superior to the others is called othering (Staszak 2009). The term othering was first coined by an Indian scholar Gayatri Spivak in her paper entitled “*The Rani of Sirmur*”. Practically, othering happened because of the ethnocentrism of each ethnicity, which means that they differentiate themselves from others and devalue them. Othering is usually practiced by a group, usually referred to as in-group or “us”, towards out-group, who is often referred to as “other” (Staszak 2009).

In the United States, the practice of othering towards Hispanics can be seen from how the media are representing the Hispanic community. For example, the mainstream media such as news outlets are more likely to correlate immigrants with Latinos (Valentino, Brader and Jardina 2013). To make matter worse, the media focused greatly on illegal immigration rather than the legal one when they are talking about the Hispanic immigrant (Pérez 2016). Moreover, the practice of othering also appears in the form of movie character tropes. According

to a report by *USC Annenberg*, Latinos stereotypes in movies are, but not limited to, being poor, isolated, and criminal (Smith, et al. 2019).

The most recent example of a Hollywood movie that depicts the practice of othering towards Hispanic is *Knives Out*. *Knives Out* is a 2019 American *Whodunit* movie directed by Rian Johnson. It tells the story of the mysterious suicide case of Harlan Thrombey, a well-known mystery author. An unknown person then hires a detective called Benoit Blanc to investigate the case. Throughout the years, *Knives out* had been nominated for several awards including the 2020 Academy Awards and 2020 BAFTA Awards, both for the best original screenplay category. This movie received a positive response both from film critics and audience, accumulating a score of 97% from 454 film critics on *Tomatometer*, a scoring system by *RottenTomatoes*, and a 92% audience score (Rotten Tomatoes 2019). According to Matthew St. Clair, a journalist from *Cinemasentries*, *Knives Out* is providing “Mysterious thrills while offering a timely critique of entitled white privilege” (Clair 2019). That “white privilege” is what drives the practice of othering done in the movie. *Knives Out* is portraying the practice of othering done by the dominant group towards the dominated group, where the dominant group being the Thrombey family which is characterized as the rich Whites, and the dominated group being the poor Hispanic, more specifically Marta Cabrera, the caretaker of Harlan Thrombey.

Even though the portrayal of discrimination towards Hispanics in modern Hollywood movies is not as popular as those towards African-Americans, it does not mean that it is not present. *Casa de Mi Padre* (2012) and *Gringo* (2018) are

examples where the Hispanics are portrayed as stereotypical characters, either as a servant, an immigrant, or even both. In those movies, the issue of “us” vs. “other” appears both implicitly and explicitly, similar to that in *Knives Out*. However, in *Knives Out*, the Hispanic servant, Marta, is the main character of the movies, instead of just being an unimportant character with little to no line. Thus, the practice of othering towards the Hispanics can be seen more throughout the movie.

In *Knives Out*, the setting was set in recent years in the United States, where the topic of othering towards Hispanic has become more relevant after the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States. In a study conducted by Lopez, Gonzalez-Barena, and Krogstad, they stated that half of the Hispanic population in the United States think that “the situation for the Hispanics in the United States has worsened over the past year” after the presidential election in which Trump became the President of the United States (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barerra and Krogstad 2018). The situation that was mentioned refers to their place in the United States society and the possibility of deportation.

Regarding the practice of othering, Gayatri Spivak (1985) argues that the practice of othering is a way in which the dominant group perceives the dominated group. In her essay, Spivak mentioned that those thoughts by the dominant group could come in three forms: they think that the others are powerless, morally bad, and that they do not deserve knowledge as well as materialistic things. This theory was branched from another postcolonialism theory by Edward Said called Orientalism. In Saidian Orientalism, the focus is the

relationship between the colonizer, more specifically the European, and “the Orient”, which refers to the people of the Eastern world who live outside the boundaries of what is supposed to be the center of the world, Europe (Said 1978). Meanwhile, in Spivak’s concept of otherness, she emphasizes the dialectical process of how the colonizer establishes their role as the one in power and how the colonized are produced as subjects (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013).

The relation between Hollywood films and American society had long been discussed by experts. I.C. Jarvie, in a book titled *Movies as Social Criticism: Aspects of Their Social Psychology* (1978), mentioned that movies are what he called “A collective consciousness of the society”, which means that movie represents the unification of the community’s behavior. Furthermore, he elaborates that the process of film making itself is a representation of society in microcosm because of how in the development of the premise of the movie to a full-length film, it involves a lot of people, especially in the context of Hollywood movie. John Belton further discussed the relationship between Hollywood film and American society in a book titled *Movies and Mass Culture* (1996). He stated that movies are embedded within certain mass cultures, thus they both mutually affect each other, making it impossible to detach filmmakers and their films from the society in which they emerged.

On a study titled “*The Promotion of American Culture through Hollywood Movies to the World*”, Wanwarang Maisuwong support the idea that Hollywood movie not only influences the society of the United States, but also the people around the world (Maisuwong 2012). To do her study, she selected a total of 30

Hollywood movies from the year 2001-2010 in which she analyzed its critical cultural values and political images. She concluded that Hollywood does have cultural effects on society which include its language, lifestyle, and ideology.

Another study that supports the idea that film affects the audience is a thesis in 2019 by Emily M. Pressler. She discussed how Hispanics are stereotyped in contemporary films and how it affects the way Hispanics are perceived in the United States. The research was conducted by analyzing several contemporary films which include *Casa de mi Padre* (2012), *Coco* (2017), and several others. Pressler concluded that the film and its representation of Hispanic stereotyped characters did affect the audience's perception of the Hispanic, primarily the younger generation. However, in her thesis, Pressler focused more on how Hispanics are portrayed instead of its effects on society.

In contrast with the idea that Hollywood films influence society, Katie Anderson wrote a paper titled "*Film as a Reflection of Society: Interracial Marriage and Stanley Kramer's Guess Who's Coming to Dinner in Late 1960s America*" which instead support the idea that Hollywood films serve as a larger representation of society. To do her research, she examined Stanley Kramer's film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and compared it to the socio-political condition of 1960s America. To conclude her paper, she stated that the film did portray the attitudes of American society in regards to the interracial marriage phenomenon.

In this research, the writer argues that in Ryan Johnson's *Knives Out*, the three forms of othering that were mentioned by Spivak can be found throughout the film. Furthermore, those practices of othering are a reflection of what happens

in American society. In *Knives Out*, the Hispanic, Marta Cabrera, is a caretaker of Harlan Thrombey, the rich White author. Even though Harlan has got a good relationship with Marta, the rest of the family has not. There are multiple occasions where the family tries to degrade Cabrera for her ethnicity while pretending to respect her. That act of discrimination represents the phenomenon that happens to Hispanics who live in the United States.

Therefore, in order to reveal whether the practice of othering towards the Hispanics in the movie *Knives Out* is present, Gayatri Spivak's theory of otherness will be used. In conducting this study, the writer is going to focus on the Hispanic main character, Marta Cabrera, and all the members of the Thrombey family. Moreover, the writer will also focus on the *mise-en-scene* of *Knives Out*. *Mise-en-scene* comprises several aspects in film making such as the camera and its arrangements, compositions, sets, props, actors, costumes, and lightings of a film (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 2020). Therefore, this study will analyze both narrative and non-narrative aspects of the movie. After that, it will be compared to the data regarding discrimination towards Hispanics that happens in the United States prior to the film being released.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Based on the explanation above, the statement of the problem can be written into one point:

1. How does the movie portray the practice of othering done by the Thrombey family towards Marta Cabrera?



### **1.3 Objective of the Study**

Referring to the statement of the problems above, the objectives of this study can be formulated as:

1. To explain the depiction of othering done by the White towards the Hispanic in the movie *Knives Out*.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

People who are part of a dominant group in a community tend to look down on those who are considered as a minority, sometimes unintentionally. Therefore, this study will hopefully help people who are considered as part of the dominant group in society to be aware of it and understand the minority better, treating them equally instead of thinking that they are the “other” and not “us”. Moreover, this study also aims to give insight to the readers regarding the relationship between a dominant group and a dominated group. In addition, the author of this study expected this research to contribute toward future cultural studies or any other studies which bring similar issues since there are things that need to be analyzed further about the practice of othering towards Hispanic depicted in movies and how it is related to the real world.

### **1.5 Definition of Key Terms**

Othering: A dialectical process in which the dominant group established its power and the dominated group is produced as subjects (Spivak 1985).

Hispanic: A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race (United States Census Bureau 2019).

White: People who originate from any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. (United States Census Bureau 2019).

Discrimination: The unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or sexual orientation (American Psychological Association 2019).