

CHAPTER III

EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Extrinsic Aspects

3.1.1. Historical Development of American Individualism

American individualism has been central to the nation's cultural identity since its founding, rooted in Enlightenment principles and shaped by the unique conditions of the American frontier. This ideology emphasizes personal autonomy, self-reliance, and freedom from external constraints. The foundational core emerged from Protestant work ethic and Calvinist theology, which emphasized individual moral responsibility and direct relationship with divine authority without institutional mediation (Weber, 1905:181). Tocqueville (1835:506) observed this as a distinctly American phenomenon where citizens withdraw into small circles of family and friends, assuming responsibility for their own destiny while remaining indifferent to broader social concerns. Unlike European societies, the absence of feudal traditions and aristocratic hierarchies allowed this individualistic ethos to develop without restraining influences (Hartz, 1955:89-92).

Throughout the 19th century, individualism evolved alongside major historical events such as westward expansion and industrialization. The frontier experience reinforced core individualistic values through what Turner (1893:227) identified as the "frontier thesis" - the idea that the American character was fundamentally shaped by encounters with wilderness, which demanded self-reliance, innovation, and independence from traditional social structures. This geographic mobility created what (Bellah et al., 1985: 55-56) termed "utilitarian individualism" - a pragmatic approach to personal advancement that viewed social relationships as voluntary

contracts designed to serve individual interests. According to (Bellah et al., 1985:21), individualism became a "first language" of American moral culture, emphasizing personal choice and freedom over collective obligation.

According to Zakaras (2022:13-15), these myths helped define what it meant to be American, framing individualism not just as a personal trait but as a civic virtue. This created what (Putnam, 2000:65-67) later critiqued as the erosion of "social capital" - the gradual replacement of collective civic engagement with privatized individual pursuits. The narrative encouraged citizens to see freedom as inseparable from personal responsibility and to measure success by individual achievement rather than communal contribution. This linkage created what Berlin (1958:16-17) would recognize as a distinctly American synthesis of negative and positive liberty, where individual autonomy became both a right and an obligation. Such historical constructs continue to shape contemporary representations of identity and agency, particularly in American film and literature, functioning as what Gramsci (1971:12-13) termed "hegemonic" discourse that reinforces social arrangements through cultural rather than coercive means.

3.1.2. Theory of American Individualism

The writer uses Cultural Symbol Theory by Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework for this research thesis. Cultural Symbol Theory focuses on how symbols function as vehicles of meaning within cultural systems, emphasizing that culture consists of "webs of significance" that humans have spun and in which they live. Rather than viewing symbols as mere representations of reality, this theory emphasizes that symbols actively shape how people understand and experience their world, functioning simultaneously as models "of" reality (representing existing cultural patterns) and models "for" reality (providing templates for action and behavior) (Geertz,

1973:5-6). Another principle is that symbolic meaning is contextual and interpretive, requiring what Geertz calls "thick description" to understand the layered significance embedded within cultural practices and representations. The way individuals and societies interpret symbols is not universal but is deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts and historical circumstances. As people engage with symbolic systems, they both draw meaning from existing cultural frameworks and contribute to the ongoing evolution of those meanings through their interpretations and actions (Geertz, 1973:10-14).

The key idea is that understanding cultural symbols requires an interpretive rather than scientific approach, recognizing that meaning emerges through the hermeneutic process of moving between individual symbolic elements and broader cultural contexts. Cultural analysis involves interpreting how people within particular cultures use symbols to create shared understanding and communicate complex ideas across generations. Symbols condense multiple layers of meaning into communicable forms, allowing societies to transmit cultural knowledge, values, and worldviews through relatively simple expressions. This interpretive framework is particularly valuable for analyzing cultural products like films, where symbols operate at multiple levels and carry both explicit and implicit meanings that reflect and shape cultural identity and social values (Geertz, 1973:14-15, 89-90).

3.1.3 Characteristics of American Individualism

Clifford Geertz's theory of culture emphasizes that culture is "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms" through which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes about life (Geertz, 1973:89). American individualism can

be understood as a cultural system of symbols that communicate meanings about autonomy, self-worth, and identity. These meanings are not biologically determined, but culturally constructed and interpreted within specific social contexts. The following are the core characteristics of American individualism when viewed through Geertz's cultural symbolic lens:

3.1.3.1. Emphasis on Personal Autonomy

In American culture, personal autonomy is more than a personal trait it is a symbolic value that signifies maturity, freedom, and self-realization. Actions like choosing one's career, rejecting external influence, or expressing dissent are culturally meaningful performances that symbolize individual agency. According to (Bellah et al., 1985), personal autonomy is central to American moral culture. In Geertz's view, these actions are part of the "webs of significance" that individuals interpret to guide behavior. Autonomy becomes a public symbol, continuously reaffirmed through rituals of independence, such as moving out of the family home or asserting personal choices against social pressure. These cultural performances reinforce autonomy as a key symbol of the American individualist ethos.

3.1.3.2. Self-Reliance

Self-reliance functions as a key cultural symbol in American society, representing strength, responsibility, and personal capability. According to (Geertz, 1973:5), humans are "suspended in webs of significance they themselves have spun," meaning that behaviors like refusing help or insisting on independence are not just practical choices but symbolic acts that reflect cultural values. These acts are interpreted within a cultural framework that prizes the myth of the self-made individual. According to (Bellah et al., 1985:142), self-reliance is deeply embedded in American moral narratives, often celebrated in life stories and public discourse as evidence of character and

integrity. Therefore, when individuals act independently, they are engaging in a culturally meaningful performance of individualism.

3.1.3.3. Nonconformity

Nonconformity in American culture is symbolically associated with authenticity, bravery, and a rejection of uniformity. According to Geertz (1973:89), culture is a system of inherited symbols through which people express and communicate values. Acts of nonconformity such as choosing an unconventional lifestyle or challenging social norms are seen as symbolic expressions of self-definition. These behaviors reflect the cultural belief that true individuality requires freedom from external expectations. According to (Riesman, 1950:20), American society values the "inner-directed" individual who follows personal principles rather than social pressures. Such symbolic resistance to conformity reinforces the cultural narrative of individualism as moral courage.

3.1.3.4 Identity Formation

Identity formation in the American context is a dynamic process shaped by symbolic engagement with cultural meanings. According to Geertz (1973:5), identity emerges through the interpretation of symbolic systems that give meaning to human experiences. Americans often construct their identities by aligning themselves with culturally meaningful values such as independence, ambition, and uniqueness. According to (Bellah et al., 1985:148), personal identity in American life is often tied to the pursuit of self-realization and personal fulfillment. These values are reinforced through symbolic acts like career choices, fashion, and speech that communicate one's individuality. Thus, identity is not fixed, but formed through continuous cultural interpretation and symbolic expression.

3.1.4. Cultural Symbolic and Its Reflection of American Individualism

3.1.4.1. Narrative Symbols

Narrative symbols in cultural texts reveal American individualistic values through story structures and character development patterns. According to (Geertz, 1973:89), cultural narratives function as "models for" behavior, providing templates for how individuals should navigate personal autonomy within social contexts. The fake relationship plot structure demonstrates the American cultural emphasis on individual agency and pragmatic problem-solving, where characters prioritize personal comfort over social authenticity while maintaining individual control over their circumstances.

3.1.4.2. Visual Symbols and Cultural Meaning

Visual symbols in American cultural products create shared cultural understanding while allowing for individualistic interpretation. Following Geertz's interpretive framework, visual elements such as professional settings, private spaces, and personal styling choices communicate individualistic values through cultural codes that audiences recognize (Geertz, 1973:14-15). These visual symbols enable coordinated cultural understanding of American individualism while accommodating diverse personal expressions of autonomous identity.

3.1.4.3. Binary Opposition Symbols

Cultural symbol theory conceptualizes meaning-making through fundamental opposing pairs that reveal American individualistic priorities. According to (Geertz, 1973:93-94), binary oppositions such as individual versus collective, authentic self versus social role, and personal choice versus social obligation function as organizing principles for American cultural logic. This symbolic framework helps explain the American cultural emphasis on individual authenticity and self-determination as culturally constructed values rather than purely natural phenomena.

3.1.5. The Effect of American Individualism on Social Relationship

3.1.5.1. Family Conflict and Independence

In the context of American individualism, family structures are influenced by cultural symbols that prioritize personal freedom and self-actualization over collective or traditional familial roles. According to (Geertz, 1973:89), a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms, individual actions such as moving out, seeking financial independence, or resisting parental authority are not just personal choices but symbolic acts embedded with cultural meaning. These acts serve as expressions of the American value of independence. In this symbolic framework, the younger generation's desire to establish their own identity is a culturally meaningful performance of individualism, which may cause tension within families that still hold traditional expectations. Thus, the conflict arises not just from behavior but from differing interpretations of what such behavior symbolizes within the cultural system..

3.1.5.2. Friendship and Trust

Friendships in American culture are shaped by the symbolic meanings individuals attach to autonomy, communication, and emotional intimacy. According to (Geertz, 1973:5), humans are suspended in webs of significance they themselves have spun (1973:5), and within this web, friendships are constructed through shared cultural symbols like honesty, loyalty, and personal space. In *Anyone But You* (2023), the evolving friendship and romantic connection between the characters are mediated through symbolic gestures, language, and emotional cues. Their relationship develops as they interpret each other's actions and words within the broader cultural context that values individual authenticity and emotional openness. Trust, therefore, is not a static bond but a symbolically mediated understanding that reflects broader cultural values of self-expression and mutual recognition. These relationships show how American individualism allows

individuals to form close bonds while still maintaining the symbolic integrity of their personal identity.