

CHAPTER 3

EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 American Studies Perspective

American Studies is an interdisciplinary approach used to analyze American society, culture, identity, and social phenomena through various perspectives including literature, film, history, and cultural practices. According to Campbell and Kean (2016:3), American Studies examines how cultural values, beliefs, and social realities shape everyday life in the United States. Through this approach, literary works and films can be understood as cultural representations reflecting social conditions and public attitudes within American society. In this study, the American Studies perspective is used to examine how *The Whale* (2022) portrays obesity, body image, and stigma within the cultural context of American society. The film is viewed not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text that reflects dominant social values regarding ideal body standards, health perceptions, and public attitudes toward obesity.

3.2 Obesity, Body Image, and Weight Stigma in American Society

Obesity has become one of the most significant health and social issues in contemporary American society. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023), more than 40 percent of American adults are classified as obese. Obesity is generally defined as an excessive accumulation of body fat that may negatively affect health and is commonly measured using Body Mass Index (BMI), with a BMI of 30 or above categorized as obesity. However, obesity is not only viewed

as a medical condition but also as a social issue that influences how individuals are perceived and treated. American culture places a strong emphasis on physical appearance and body image, particularly ideals of thinness, fitness, and self-discipline. Bordo (2003:57) argues that slim bodies are often associated with beauty, attractiveness, success, and self-control, while larger bodies are frequently viewed negatively. As a result, obesity is often socially constructed as a sign of laziness, lack of discipline, and unhealthy behavior rather than a complex condition influenced by biological, psychological, and socioeconomic factors. These perceptions are reinforced through media representations that frequently portray thin bodies as ideal and desirable. According to Saguy (2013:18), obesity is often framed as a personal failure rather than a broader social or health issue. Consequently, individuals with obesity may experience pressure to conform to dominant body ideals, leading to feelings of shame and insecurity. Furthermore, obesity is closely associated with weight stigma, which refers to negative attitudes, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviors directed toward individuals because of their body weight.

Puhl and Heuer (2009:941) explain that weight stigma is one of the most socially accepted forms of prejudice in the United States. Individuals with obesity often experience various forms of stigma, including body shaming, which involves criticism or ridicule of body size; negative labeling and stereotyping, where they are perceived as lazy, unattractive, irresponsible, or lacking self-discipline; verbal humiliation through insulting comments; social distancing, where others avoid interacting with them; social exclusion from social relationships and activities; and discrimination in

workplaces, schools, healthcare settings, and family environments. Repeated exposure to these stigmatizing attitudes may lead to internalized stigma, in which individuals gradually accept society's negative judgments about themselves. As a result, they may experience low self-esteem, emotional distress, social withdrawal, and feelings of isolation. Therefore, obesity becomes not only a physical condition but also a stigmatized social identity shaped by cultural expectations and public perceptions. This condition is reflected in *The Whale* (2022), where Charlie's experiences illustrate how obesity, body image, and weight stigma influence social interactions, self-perception, and emotional well-being.

3.2 Social Stigma

This theory defines stigma Theory Erving Goffman (1963) as an attribute that discredits an individual, reducing them from a whole person to someone socially devalued. He identifies physical stigma "abominations of the body" as one of the most powerful forms. Erving Goffman (1963) defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting," meaning an attribute that discredits a person, changing their social status from an individual who is considered normal to an individual who is viewed as defective in the eyes of society. Stigma is not simply a social identity, but rather a form of social discrimination that demeans a person's dignity.

According to Goffman, stigma is divided into three categories:

- a) **Abominations of the body:** This stigma refers to the stigma associated with physical differences that deviate from societal norms, such as obesity disability, or other body conditions considered less than ideal. In this category,

the body becomes the primary focus of judgment, which often leads to negative reactions, discrimination, or social exclusion.

- b) **Blemishes of individual character:** In this case, stigma can be interpreted as something related to the individual's own character that involves negative judgments or perceptions of others regarding the moral qualities or personal traits of that person. In this case, a person can be labeled as undisciplined, weak, or lacking self-control, which reflects how society associates certain conditions with perceived moral failure rather than objective reality.
- c) **Tribal stigma:** In this final point, stigma can be defined and understood as something that arises within a particular group due to a person's membership, such as an ethnic group, race, religion, or same-sex sexual orientation. This stigma can be described as group-specific because it transcends individual boundaries and is inherent to that particular group. It is often passed down and reinforced from generation to generation.

These three categories of stigma demonstrate that stigma applies not only to the individual but also to broader social and cultural groups, which can be shaped by societal norms and values.

3.2.1 Front Stage and Back Stage

In addition to stigma, Erving Goffman (1959:22) also introduced the dramaturgical perspective, a theory that views social interaction as a form of performance found in the daily lives of individuals who act as actors who present themselves in certain ways to create impressions in front of others. This perspective

shows that identity is built and maintained through interactions between individuals. Goffman (1959:32) explains that individuals engage in impression management, which refers to the process of controlling how they are perceived by others. This is done by adjusting behavior, appearance, and communication according to social expectations. As a result, individuals often present different versions of themselves depending on the social situation. Goffman distinguishes between two main regions of performance, namely the front stage and the backstage. The front stage refers to a public space where individuals perform according to social norms and expectations. In this space individuals present an idealized version of themselves to gain acceptance and avoid negative judgment, the backstage refers to a private space where individuals can express their authentic selves without the pressure of social expectations.