

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Studies

The life and identity of American society are inseparable from how the values of individualism are understood and applied in daily life. American culture can be understood as a set of values, beliefs, and practices that shape how Americans perceive themselves, their society, and their way of life. Within this cultural context, individualism is reflected in the emphasis on personal freedom, independence, and responsibility for one's own choices. These values encourage individuals to exercise freedom in decision-making and take responsibility for their choices and their consequences, making individualism one of the characteristics of American culture (Bellah et al., 1985:169). In this way, individualism is deeply rooted in American society, and various forms of American cultural expression, including literature, music, film, and television, often praise and celebrate individuals who achieve their goals through personal effort, particularly those who succeed independently and against the odds (Callero, 2013:18). This value is also reflected in Emerson's concept of self-reliance, which emphasizes trusting one's own thoughts and beliefs rather than relying on external influences (Emerson, 1841:1).

Various forms of American cultural expression, including literature, music, film, television, and popular culture, can illustrate the social values present in American society. One such form is film, which serves not only as a medium of

entertainment but also as a distinct social practice that connect narratives to the culture and ideology of its society (Turner, 1999:49). This function is evident in the film *The Shape of Water* (2017). Although the Cold War serves as it is historical setting, a period when institutional authority in the United States was particularly strong, this film, directed by Guillermo del Toro, presents an interesting portrayal of how the values of individualism are reflected by it is main character. And presented in romance-fantasy genre, making the film uniquely different from other American films.

The 2018 Academy Award-winning film, *The Shape of Water* (2017) tells the story of how Elisa Esposito's life changes after she forms an emotional and romantic bond with the Amphibian Man. This supernatural creature is being held in a secret government laboratory to serve as a subject for U.S. military experiments aimed at gaining an edge over the Soviet Union. Elisa, a mute janitor who works at the same laboratory, accidentally finds out about the mistreatment The Amphibian Man is receiving and decides to take a big risk to help him escape from the lab. So that The Amphibian can return to the open ocean and head to the Amazon, his natural habitat. With this decision, Elisa becomes directly involved in a conflict with those responsible for the Amphibian Man's safety at Occam Lab. Through many decisions Elisa makes in this film, she embodies a phenomenon that aligns with certain values of individualism, especially regarding her belief in what she knows is right, which she will stand by no matter the risks.

The writer assumes that Elisa Esposito as the main character in this film is an interesting subject for analysis because she consistently relies on her own judgement when making important decisions, regardless of the fact that she is

facing institutional authorities who clearly hold the highest power. The actions she repeatedly takes based on her personal belief without any pressure from those people around her reflect the value of individualism through her ability to trust her own judgment above all else. In this way, she must face rejection for the choices she believes are right, as well as all the consequences she faces when she decides to actually take action.

The research on how Elisa's self-confidence reflects the value of individualism, as well as the various challenges she faces in maintaining her individualism in the film remains very limited compared to the abundance of research that has been conducted on the film *The Shape of Water* (2017). Therefore, this thesis examines how Elisa's self-trust reflects individualism and identifies the challenges she faces in maintaining her individualism to achieve her goals by applying Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of self-reliance.

1.2 Research Questions

There are several research questions in this study that the writer would like to explore further:

1. How are the intrinsic elements depicted in *The Shape of Water* (2017)?
2. How does Elisa's self-trust reflect individualism in *The Shape of Water* (2017)?
3. What challenges does Elisa face in maintaining her individualism in *The Shape of Water* (2017)?

1.3 Objective of the Studies

Based on the research questions, there are three objectives of this study:

1. To examine the intrinsic elements in *The Shape of Water* (2017).
2. To examine how Elisa's self-trust reflects the idea of individualism in *The Shape of Water* (2017).
3. To analyze the challenges Elisa faces in maintaining her individualism in *The Shape of Water* (2017).

1.4 Scope of the Studies

The scope of this study is the analysis of the intrinsic elements in *The Shape of Water* (2017), particularly the narrative and cinematographic aspects that support the portrayal of Elisa Esposito's character as the main character. This study also focuses on analyzing how Elisa's self-trust reflects individualism through Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of Self-Reliance and the challenges she faces in maintaining her individualism throughout the film.

1.5 Previous Studies

In this chapter, the writer reviews several previous studies that are relevant to the present research. These studies provide theoretical foundations and broader perspectives on individualism, self-reliance, and *The Shape of Water* (2017). They also help identify the research gap that distinguishes the present study from previous works. The first previous study is conducted by Leah Byrnes (2016) entitled "*Know Thyself: Individualism in Cold War America and Disney's The Mickey Mouse Club*". This research explores how Disney television shows

promoted American individualism during the Cold War. Byrnes explains that this individualism was built on mixed ideas, such as being independent while also fitting in with social expectations. The study reveals how popular media encouraged people to feel completely free and unique while still following the main rules of society. This study provides a strong foundation for understanding individualism as a core American value.

The second previous study is an undergraduate thesis written by Samantha (2018) entitled “*The Human–Nature Relation Portrayed in The Shape of Water Movie (2017)*”. Using an ecocritical approach, the study analyzes the relationship between humans and nature as represented through the amphibian creature. The findings show that Elisa's compassionate treatment of the creature contrasts with the exploitative attitudes of other characters. Although the study primarily focuses on ecological issues, it also provides a better understanding of Elisa's character and her personal values, which become relevant to the present research.

The third is a journal article titled “*Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Self-Reliance in Katniss Everdeen’s Individualism.*” by Mahlina (2019). Using an American Studies approach, the study examines how Katniss Everdeen embodies Emerson’s concept of self-reliance through her strong personal independence, personal beliefs, and resistance to social pressure. The findings demonstrate that trusting one's own judgment plays an important role in shaping individual identity. This study provides a useful theoretical reference for applying Emerson's concept of self-reliance to the analysis of literary and film characters.

Another relevant previous study is an undergraduate thesis entitled “*An Analysis of Self-Reliance in The Pursuit of Happiness Movie Script*” (2020) by

Maria Cristina Pascalia Pietresz. This study examines the concept of self-reliance as a moral value reflected through the main character's actions and decisions in the film *The Pursuit of Happyness*. Using Ralph Waldo Emerson's theory of self-reliance and Linda and Eyre's moral values framework, the research emphasizes self-reliance as the ability to trust one's own thoughts, solve personal problems independently, and resist social pressure. This study contributes to the present research by providing another example of how Emerson's theory can be applied to film analysis.

The last is an article entitled "*Monstrosity, Othering and Hegemony: A Posthumanist Perspective of the Film The Shape of Water*" (2024) by Nandita M. S. This study analyzes *The Shape of Water* using posthumanist and monster theory, focusing on the concepts of monstrosity, othering, and power hierarchy within society. It highlights how characters such as the Amphibian creature, Elisa, Zelda, and Giles are marginalized due to differences in ability, race, sexuality, and social status. By applying Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory, the study reveals how society constructs the notion of "the other" to maintain dominance and hegemony. Although this research provides an in-depth discussion of marginalization and posthuman identity, it does not specifically examine Elisa's individualism through Emerson's concept of self-trust and resistance as driving forces behind her actions. The study provides valuable insight into the social issues represented in the film and broadens the understanding of Elisa's character from a posthumanist perspective.

Based on the findings of the five previous studies, it can be concluded that scholars have approached *The Shape of Water* (2017) and Emerson's concept of

self-reliance from various perspectives. While these studies provide valuable insights into individualism, identity, ecology, posthumanism, and character development, limited attention has been given to Elisa Esposito's self-trust as a reflection of individualism. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how Elisa's self-trust reflects individualism and the challenges she faces in maintaining it through Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of self-reliance.

1.6 Research Method

1.6.1 Data and Resources of Data

The type of data used in this study is qualitative method. Qualitative research refers to methods for exploring the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of various things (Lune and Berg, 2009). The primary data used by the writer for this study consists of scenes and dialogue from the film *The Shape of Water* (2017), directed and produced by Guillermo del Toro with Vanessa Taylor, who also wrote the screenplay. The secondary data used to analyze this film comes from journals, articles, and books, which serve as supporting sources for this study.

1.6.2 Method of Data Collection

The use of library research in this study served as a method for collecting important data and information. It then functioned as a reliable source for the writer to analyze. This method was the most suitable to use because it involves search techniques designed to capture factual information, with sources clearly identified as individuals or experts relevant to a research question (George, 2008:1–6). Next, the author watched the film *The Shape of Water* (2017) as the object of study,

employing note-taking techniques and documentation methods. The purpose of these techniques was to complement the library research method by gathering all necessary information for analysis. According to Creswell (2014), note-taking involves recording information from various sources by writing down the necessary data. While watching the film repeatedly, the author took notes and captured screenshots of scenes containing the required data.

1.6.3 Method of Approach

In this study, the writer uses a sociological approach to analyze the portrayal of individualism in *The Shape of Water* (2017). Within this approach, the writer examines Elisa Esposito's character, conflicts, and actions in relation to the social conditions portrayed in the film. The approach also considers how social norms, institutional authority, and social differences influence Elisa's choices and actions throughout the story. For the extrinsic aspect, the writer applies Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of "Self-Reliance" to examine how Elisa's self-reliance reflects individualism. This concept emphasizes the importance of trusting one's own thoughts, acting according to one's convictions, and relying on one's own abilities. Therefore, the analysis focuses on Elisa's thoughts, actions, and decisions as representations of self-reliance within the social context of the film.

1.7 Organization of the Writing

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the writer explains the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, previous studies, scope of the study, method of study, and the writing organization of the study that the writer is conducting.

CHAPTER II INTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter consists of the theoretical framework and definitions related to the intrinsic aspects of the research problem.

CHAPTER III EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter consists of the concept of individualism, the historical development of individualism in American society, and Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of self-reliance, including the aspects of self-confidence and resistance.

CHAPTER IV DISCUSSION

This chapter consists of analysis on the research questions established by the writer in the earlier section.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

This chapter is the conclusion that comes out of writing this research.

REFERENCES

