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Film & Literary Analysis

Kinship; More Than Blood (Film Analysis)

Kinship: noun, blood relationship. The theme of kinship often serves as a powerful lens through which identity and family relationships are challenged. In Chris Weitz's "A Better Life," and Alfonso Cuarón's "Roma," we not only see these things but also shed light on the broader societal constructs that shape them. Both films are perfect examples of cinematic narratives that dive deep into kinship's role in developing their stories, and how it affects the society around them. We can further examine kinship's role by discussing how kinship is established, how it is lost, and the role that deeper societal issues play in affecting it.

Throughout each film, we establish a sense of kinship within each context. Kinship in "A Better Life" starts with Carlos and Luis being connected by blood, Carlos a hard-working father, and Luis a kid going through the hardships of high school. Their bond is strengthened through hard work, and Carlos' sacrifice as Luis starts to pick up some of that responsibility – shown in the scene where they work together on landscaping (*A Better Life*, 00:15:45). In contrast, in "Roma" Cleo starts the film with no kinship, all she has is her husband who leaves her shortly after finding out that she's pregnant. For her, kinship is forged, but it is strong: the family she works

her takes her in like one of their own. We see her establish friendship specifically during the scene where Cleo comforts one of the children through distress in their own life (*Roma*, 00:25:10). As well as that, we can see that both of these movies exemplify different societal factors and how they affect their kinship. In “A Better Life” we see their financial issues and the threat of deportation stem a fight between Carlos and Luis, eventually resulting in Luis running away in frustration (*A Better Life*, 01:02:30). Another scene illustrating societal hierarchies and class distinctions impacting kinship bonds is when Cleo accompanies the family to a martial arts event (*Roma*, 00:55:20). Here, the contrast between Cleo's role as a domestic worker and the family's privileged position within society is evident, highlighting the power dynamics that influence their interactions. Within both of these scenes, their kinship with their loved ones is impacted by societal factors that they can't control.

In both films, “Roma” and “A Better Life” we see big issues in society come down and affect the protagonists. In “A Better Life,” we can start to see the difference in generations and their cultures with Carlos and Luis. One example of this is when Carlos gets mad at Luis for assimilating to being in a gang (*A Better Life*, 00:20:15). In “Roma,” internal familial struggles within the household are depicted through conflicts between Cleo and the family members. Scenes portraying Cleo's mistreatment and exploitation show the impact of socioeconomic disparities on kinship in the film (*Roma*, 00:50:45, 01:25:30). Carlos and Luis could relate to Cleo's socioeconomic disparity, as these social gaps, especially racism also hinder their kinship. One scene that sticks out is when Carlos and Luis are walking on the street and they pass a sign that says “Too many Mexicans, not enough bullets.” (*A Better Life*, 00:45:30) Carlos and Luis

are not phased, they are used to the racism by now. With each other, they persevere through hardships and can rely on one another to help.

Forming kinship bonds and maintaining those relationships are both extremely important in each film, but the key message revolves around the threat of losing each character's kinship. In both films, the fear of separation from loved ones establishes a sense of vulnerability for the protagonists. In “A Better Life,” Carlos faces the threat of being deported, which would mean he would be separated from Luis (*A Better Life*, 01:15:45). For Cleo, it’s the economic instability that puts her at risk of losing her job, meaning she would lose her bonds with the family. We can see this in the film when she is moving out and reminiscing on memories (*Roma*, 00:55:10). One way that these films differ is each character’s responses to a potential loss of kinship. Carlos deals with his deportation by working extra hard to make sure Luis has ‘a better life.’ We can see this in the scene where Carlos talks to Luis about his potential separation (*A Better Life*, 00:55:20). On the other hand, Cleo’s response is fighting everything to keep her kinship with her family despite her challenges. We can see this when Cleo contemplates the possibility of leaving the family, reflecting her fear of losing that kinship (*Roma*, 01:16:32).

The role that kinship plays in “A Better Life” and “Roma” not only serves the purpose of building a plot to entertain the audience but also to inform the audience about real issues that aren’t talked about often. Kinship acts as a way to move the audience, build emotion, and empathize with the characters. These films both dive into the intricacies of these families going through societal challenges, highlighting issues that are neglected in the US.

Authenticity (Literary Analysis)

Erika L. Sánchez writes the story of Julia Reyes, a 15-year-old girl with hopes of finding her identity while dealing with immense societal pressures. “I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter” explores Julia’s racial and ethnic identity, with the central theme of authenticity. The contrasting perceptions of authenticity between Julia and her family members bring attention to Julia’s identity formation under societal pressures. Her internal struggle to be the ‘perfect Mexican daughter’ is rooted in her quest for individuality and her family’s expectations. Through the contrast between Julia’s perceptions and her family’s traditional norms, Sánchez emphasizes the complexity of identity formation amidst cultural pressures, emphasizing the significance of staying authentic to yourself.

Authenticity within ethnic identities is a central theme in the novel, exemplified by the polar opposite perceptions of Julia and her family members. Her internal conflict with her Mexican identity is exemplified by her aversion to traditional customs for individuality, for example speaking Spanish. We can see this in the scene where Julia believes Ramiro will think she’s dumb because she doesn’t know Spanish: “Sólo habla español, lo cual me pone nerviosa. Obviamente lo hablo bien, pero sueno diez veces más inteligente en inglés. Mi vocabulario no es tan extenso y a veces me trabo. Espero que no piense que soy tonta, porque no lo soy.” (Sanchez, 47). This completely goes against Julia’s family's adherence to traditional cultural norms. The tension between expectations and her authenticity is aggravated by the traditional gender roles

and stereotypes that she refuses to conform to. One example of this is when she sees the role her mom has in her family and says “Prefiero vivir en las calles que ser una esposa mexicana sumisa que se pasa todo el día cocinando y limpiando.” (Sánchez, 12). Julia’s identity formation here stays authentic because she stays true to the person she wants to be, even if her family believes otherwise.

Understanding each character’s relationship to idealized narratives is incredibly important to understanding how each character explores their version of authenticity. Diving deeper into their perceptions of race, ethnicity gender, and sexuality can help us paint a clearer picture of individual opinions of authenticity. One example is Julia’s mother adheres to the traditional Mexican daughter narrative, expecting Julia to learn how to cook, clean, and find a husband who does the rest, but Julia wants to be independent and live a different life. We can see glimpses of this when Julia makes subtle remarks making fun of her mom’s view of a perfect world: “Si termino siendo una señorita de oficina que usa pantalones y se cambia a zapatillas blancas para caminar a casa desde el tren, simplemente me lanzaré de un rascacielos” (Sánchez, 46). On the other hand, Julia challenges these ideals and seeks to find her authentic self. We can see this when she confronts her mom and says “Si esto es lo que significa ser mujer, tal vez no quiero ser una” (Sánchez, 163). Julia’s portrayal of authenticity is characterized by her finding herself unique in a world where she doesn’t fit in with American society, or Mexican norms. One example of this is when Julia says “Necesitas subir un poco de peso. —Es gracioso que en Estados Unidos soy demasiado gorda, y en México demasiado flaca.” (Sánchez, 159). This shows that she’s still trying to find her place in the world around her with different idealized narratives.

While Julia stays authentic to herself, she feels guilt about her family. Her mother sets a high bar for her, following her sister who was the ‘perfect Mexican daughter.’ Sanchez makes it clear throughout the novel from both perspectives that their contrasting opinions affect both of them; one example is when Julia says: “Me ha comparado con mi hermana cada día de mi vida, ¿por qué debería esperar que eso cambie ahora que ella está muerta?” This pressure to be perfect places a massive weight on her shoulders to live up to the expectations her mother sets for her. This affects her narrative of authenticity by trying her hardest to be someone she’s not. The guilt gets to Julia multiple times throughout the book: “Te recuerdo que tú no eres la que manda. ¿Por qué siempre lo complicas todo? ¿Por qué nunca eres feliz? Intento hacer algo bueno, ¿y te portas así? Dios mío, ¿quién hubiera pensado que tendría una hija tan malagradecida? —Amá tiene una gran habilidad para el arte de generar culpa; podría ganar una medalla de oro.” (Sánchez, 69) On her family’s side, they don’t know the constraint Julia feels from them. She’s not open with any of her problems, leaving her alone to snap. We can see this when Julia’s mom asks about school: “¿Hay algo que no me estás diciendo? —pregunta mientras me toca la frente.—¡Ya te dije que no! Por el amor de Dios, déjame en paz” (Sánchez, 77). This just leaves Julia alone finding her authenticity wherever she goes.

Overall, authenticity is a term defined by one. Julia’s clashing perspectives on what authenticity means in the novel highlight the complexity of identity formation amidst societal pressures, emphasizing the significance of individuality within cultural contexts. Through her journey, Erika L. Sánchez sheds light on the importance of staying true to oneself. Julia embraces

individuality in her world of colliding cultures, something that millions of people go through silently.

Works Cited

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