

Hyphenated Americans' Experiences in Multicultural Interactions Portrayed in American Fictions

Retno Wulandari

English Department, Faculty of Humanities,
Diponegoro University, Semarang, Indonesia

***Abstract :** American society cannot be detached from the society's multiculturalism. The various ethnic groups inevitably may lead into cooperations, frictions, or conflicts in their interaction. Fiction, as one of literary works, is one of the ways in picturing its reality. Most of hyphenated-American writers wrote both their experiences and imagination through fictions which mostly are about those of racial-based. Some fictions such as Sui Sin Far's *In the Land of the Free*, *Bienvenido Santos' Immigration Blues*, Anzia Yezierska's *Soap and Water* depict the unfavorable experiences in their first interaction in America. While, Monfoon Leong's *New Year for Fong Wing* and Gish Jen's *In the American Society* elaborate the inter-race interaction and their confusion in blending their identity in the new land. It is found that though they can stand living in a multicultural society, most hyphenated Americans still face situation where sometimes they are still regarded as the subordinated class and it leads into fear and uncomfortable life. Racism is still big issue in American life even though it has long been declared that all men are created equal. In the interaction process some of them still had a tight tie to their origins, while others could easily conform to the American culture.*

***Key words :** hyphenated-American, ethnic group, multiculturalism, racism.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Today's global era demands a high people's movement from one place to another. This situation lead into the world to what some experts mention as global village where people from different origins inevitably interact each other. This is what people call as the multicultural society, when some groups of cultures and society exist and interact in one region.

Definition of multiculturalism itself can run into many ways. Bikhu Parekh (2000, pp. 2-3) wrote that multiculturalism is not about difference and identity *per se* but about those that are embedded in and sustained by culture; that is a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organize their individual and collective lives. He differentiates terms of 'multicultural' and 'multiculturalism'. The term 'multicultural' refers to the fact of cultural diversity, while the term 'multiculturalism' to a normative response to that fact.

Caleb Rosado (as cited in Prambudi, 2010) defines multiculturalism as a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural contact which empowers all within the organization or society.

However, the interactions sometimes cannot run smoothly. Some frictions may occur during the inter-race interaction. As the most multicultural nation in the world, America has been

undergoing the ups and downs on its race interaction. Race itself was thought of as a biological concept, yet its precise definition was the subject of debates until today (Omi and Winant, 2009, p. 19). It is defined as a group of people who perceive themselves and are perceived by others as possessing distinctive hereditary traits. However, it is not a merely simple way to classify people according to their genetic make-up. Rather, in this case race is used for locating people according to culturally defined social positions. It means that race becomes a socially constructed concept (Rose, 1997, p.12).

Besides defined as a physical traits, human kinds are also separated by differences of group traditions, national or religious, that may or may not be associated with biological distinctions. Groups whose members share a unique social and cultural heritage passed on from one generation to the next a known as ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are frequently identified by distinctive patterns of family life, language, recreation, religion, and other customs that cause them to be differentiated from others. (Rose, 1997, pp. 11-12).

In a society made up of many cultural groups such as in the US, the intensity of ethnic identity or ethnicity is apt to be determined by the attitude of the the dominant members of society toward the ‘stranger’ in their midst (Rose, 1997, p. 12). This leads into the concept of ‘we and they’, ‘self and other’, ‘minority and majority’ in American’s aspects of life. Some dominant cultures, especially European-Americans and other white ethnics have a lot more choices and opportunities rather than other ethnics, so that the non-white systematically becomes the subordinate.

The concept of America-nonAmerica and dominant-subordinate led into what it is called as hyphenated America. The term was popularized by former president Theodore Roosevelt during World War I to criticize Americans who had some loyalties to the countries of their ancestors more than that of to America. (http://www.conservapedia.com/Hyphenated_American). These groups of people still maintained some connections with their ancestor’s identities and not gave up their ethnic identities. Hence the term is put into two words, in which the first refers to the origin country, while the later refers to the new country, such as German- American, Irish-American, Asian-American, African-American, and soon.

Literature is one of the ways a society picturing the reality of life. Even though it is a work of arts, which means that the writer’s fantasy, obsessions, and emotion are included in it, yet the work of arts cannot be separated from the society’s socio and culture. American literature itself is rather hard to define—same with the difficulties in defining what American society is. It contains innumerable literary works written by Asian-American writers, African-American writers, Hispanic-American writers, Indian-American writers, and others with their distinctive characteristics. However, most of their writings have the same lines, namely of the situations in multicultural interactions. The discussion below will be about the hyphenated Americans’ experiences in that interactions connected with the social and historical background.

B. Hyphenated Americans in Early Immigration Periods as In The Fictions

The US immigrants, including Asian-Americans has been experiencing the ups and downs on its multiracial interactions in the US. The term of Asian-American itself refers to individuals of East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asian origin. In the mid to late 19th century, after three centuries of Asian immigration to the US, Asian sojourners and settlers received more attention from white Americans than any time previously. At that time immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, Phillipines and the Punjab formed a population of about one million, in which their

European counterparts were estimated around 35 million. Asian-Americans were regarded as 'yellow peril' among American workers who felt to be threatened by the coming of Asian-Americans since they could be paid in lower wages (Adams, 2008, pp. 8-9).

Some agitations took in various forms, including literature. Some of American writers sympathized over Asian Americans' destiny, yet some of them still regarded them as threat. The early Chinese-American writer Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton) wrote the Chinese-American immigrants' experience in the new land. Written ca 1900, *In The Land of The Free* tells about a grief story of the immigrant's coming to the US. Taking the setting in San Francisco, the story describes how a Chinese-American couple must be separated from their two-year-old son once the boy stepped in the US land with his mother. Under the reason of US government immigration law, the son would be taken care of the US government until waiting for Washington's policy to return him to the parents.

Chinese were not allowed to apply for US citizenship due to the restrictive US immigration policies enacted against non-white since 1870. During that time, Whites competed with Chinese for jobs, and Chinese became the targets of violence and were driven out of small towns and villages and sought refuge in large cities. These actions were caused by prejudice. Kitano (1985, p. 50) defined prejudice as an irrationally based negative attitude towards a racial or ethnic group. This attitude, according to Rose (as cited in Kitano 1985, p. 50), cause, support, or justify discrimination. This racial prejudice against Chinese was exacerbated by fear of competition from aliens, prompted calls for restrictive federal immigration laws (Chae, 2008, pp. 22-23).

This discrimination in law system enforces social inequality. Social inequality based on racial lines means that whites usually will be assigned the more desirable position, and that people of color will be regarded as 'leftovers' (Kitano, 1985, p. 34). It determines who gets what such as food, housing, health care, education and political power, and in governmental services and tax benefits (Kerbo as cited in Kitano, 1985, pp. 35-36).

The sad story in *In The Land of The Free* had not been ceased yet since that Chinese-American couple had to work very hard to release their son. By any means they pushed their efforts including paying a lawyer at a very high price—until selling almost all their valuable goods—for that purpose. The gleam of hope appeared. At the determined day of meeting, Lae Choo, the mother, was taken to a nursery school to meet her son who had been away for months. However, instead of embracing his mother the boy refused to meet and even bade her (Far, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds. 1991).

Adams (2008, pp. 10-11) wrote that in some Asian-American works of literature, San Francisco is mentioned to be the nightmare place where predominantly Chinese working-class men were imprisoned in severe condition. In early Asian-American literature almost works of arts including poems and short stories starkly described the harsh immigration experiences. Sui Sin Far elucidated how Chinese-American still received unjust treatment caused by the enactment of the unfair laws. The concept of 'we and they' brought the thought that the White—which are from European descendants—are superior than non-White

The immigration predicament was not experienced by the Chinese immigrants only, but also by the Filipinos. This situation is portrayed by Bienvenido Santos in *Immigration Blues* which depicts the life of an old Filipino-American man, Alipio Palma, whose wife had passed away. Alipio was a lonely and limp widower—because of car accident—and actually looked for friend for talking. He had been US citizen since 1945. One day two Filipino women visited him. The rather large woman, Antonieta Zafra, introduced herself as the wife of Carlito Zafra, Alipio's friend in Philippines. She said that she got married to Zafra to save her life from

being deported to Philippines. Alipio remembered his first meeting with his late wife, Seniang, a Filipino, who agreed to marry him in seeking for protection over US immigration law as well. Seniang was also threatened to be deported to her origin country unless she could be a US citizen, which one of the ways was by marrying the US citizen. Seniang would sacrifice anything and dedicate herself to Alipio, the man who she met by chance, as long as she would not be taken back to Philippines. Demanded by his desire to build a harmonious family and seeing the faithfulness in Seniang's heart, Alipio agreed with Seniang's offers. They had led a happy marriage until they were separated by Seniang's death (Santos, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds., 1991).

Filipino is including the big three of the largest Asian immigrants beside Chinese and Japanese. When it was under the tutelage of US government from Spain, Filipinos were allowed to migrate to the US without quota system. Due to the increasing number of the immigration, the US government barred immigration from those who were "not eligible" as US citizenship such as Japanese and Chinese. As the result, American employers turned to Filipinos as the cheap labors and sentiments over Filipino led the government to reclassify Filipinos as the 'aliens' by imposing quota system and even arranged expulsion over the Filipinos (Padilla, as cited in Schaefer, ed. 2008, p.494-495).

In that time immigration law was a threatening matter. Women became the suffered party since they must do anything to save their lives in the US.

She still had a little money, from home, and she was not too worried about being jobless. But there was the question of her status as an alien. Once out of the community, she was no longer entitled to stay in the United States, let alone secure employment. The immigration office began to hound her, as it did other Filipinos in similar predicaments (Santos, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds., 1991, p.96).

Returning to Philippines was not the wise way out since they would be considered as a loser. They went to the US with great hope to be successful and the hope had been put to their shoulders.

At home they would be forced to invent stories, tell lies to explain away why they returned so soon. All their lives they had to learn how to cope with the stigma of failure in a foreign land. They were losers and no longer fit for anything useful. (Santos, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds., 1991, p. 96).

The uneasiness in arriving the new land was experienced by Russian-Americans as well as told in Anzia Yezierska's *Soap and Water*. Different from the two above fictions whose the main characters having difficulties dealing with immigration offices, the main character in this fiction encountered problems with her new society. Told in a more joyful narration, *Soap and Water* describes a Russian immigrant girl who felt that America did not welcome her. She felt that her community in the US was hostile, even her dean in college suggested that she should take a bath as often as possible since her appearance was annoying. Yezierska depicted that her skin looked oily, the hair unkempt, and her fingernails sadly neglected so that the dean always said, "Soap and water are cheap. Anyone can be clean." (Yezierska, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds., 1991, p. 105).

The main character (I) had to work very hard at days and went to school at night for her survival, to get better standard of living, and to get wider opportunity to get to make socialization with other people. Her salary was quite low so that she could not buy things to support her

appearance. Yeziarska made allusion how America was not a friendly land since it took care of the trivials and treat the immigrants inhuman. The allusion was made in satire when the main character's diploma certificate was detained since her appearance was not regarded good enough to be a teacher.

Russia immigrants came in two waves. The first wave was in the late 19th century caused by the escaping 1881-1882 pogrom by Alexander III. While the second wave was in the wake of October revolution and Russia Civil War. In this period, US became the second largest destination after France (www.wikipedia.org/Russian_American). Escaping from the difficulties encountered in their origin land, the immigrants put high hopes for the new land. In this fiction, the character still put America in her heart and optimistic that the situation would change.

I had come a refugee from the Russia pogroms, aflame with dreams of America. I did not find America in sweatshops, much less in schools and colleges. But for hundred of years the persecuted races all over the world were nurtured on hopes of America (Yeziarska, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds.,1991, p. 109).

In the midst of her loneliness and poverty she questioned about the America that she had been looking for. With her remained hopes and power she tried to wake and build the new spirit despite in the uneasiness.

My body was worn to the bone from overwork, my footsteps dragged with exhaustion, but my eyes still sought the sky, praying, ceaselessly praying, the dumb, inarticulate prayer of the lost immigrant: "America! Ach, America! Where is America?" (Yeziarska, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds.,1991, p.109).

After ten years passed, the character met with her former lecturer and they had a good talking. She felt the undiscereable happiness for the first time when a warm hand might talk to her. She felt that she found what she looked for so far : America.

Yeziarska elucidated how a small sweet talk may influence a lot for immigrants psychologically. The small welcome, the friendly attitudes, and also equal position and fair opportunity would bring happiness to them since they felt to be respected. At the end of the story, though only received a gleam of happiness the character confessed that finally she found America.

C. Hyphenated Americans in Their Daily Interactions in the US as in Fictions

During their interactions with American society, the hyphenated Americans also experience ambiguity of identity. In one side they are American citizen and living in America, but on the other side they could not be detached from their origin land. In Monfoong Leong's *New Year for Fong Wing*, the ambiguity haunted Fong Wing, the main character, a Chinese-American who lost his three sons in war defending the US, in which he regretted for. Though he had been in the US for long time however he still felt that he did not belong to the new land.

He felt a bit ashamed as he answered, "Before son went to war, I asked him same question. He said he was not going to fight brothers; he was American fighting for his country against his enemy." He shook his head sadly. "Mun, young men are not like us. Old country, old brotherhood of blood means very little to them. They are too much American, too little Chinese." (Leong, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds.,1991, p.120)

The first generations of immigrants tended to have a tight bond to their ancestors. American-born Chinese are more oriented to American life and culture, in line with 'Hansen's Law' 1938 mentioning that 'what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember (Rose, 1997, p. 61). This happens to Fong Wing where he still thought about his Chinese identity, while his sons had never considered it as a big deal.

As the earlier immigrant, Fong Wing could not diminish his memories about China. In the US he still kept his old tradition such as playing fan tan game--a traditional Chinese gambling game--with his Chinese friends, visiting Chinatown, and also chatting with his Chinese friends. Sometimes he was rather disturbed of seeing the situation changes around him.

Fong Wing, watching the boy, was disturbed. In his own youth working in a gambling house was understandable. A Chinese America could find work only in restaurants, laundries, or gambling houses. Today there was opportunity almost without limit. Fong Wing came in the hope of winning enough to ease the emptiness, the barrenness of his existence (Leong, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds.,1991, p. 122).

The Asian immigrants before the Immigration act of 1965 were mostly unskilled laborers and legally categorized as "unsassimilable" aliens. Since the Immigration Act of 1965 formally abolished the prohibition against Asians, a new pattern of immigration occurred. Immigration quota after 1965 immigration policy were mostly given to skilled laborers (professionals) or people who have capital to invest in the US (Chae, 2008, p.24). This new pattern of society might bring new pattern of interaction of the main character with his surroundings.

The problems with interaction is also described in Gish Jen's *In The American Society*. Divided into two parts, the fiction tells about a Chang family, a Chinese American family who lived happily in a town in the US. As mostly happened in the Chinese immigrant who are mostly entrepreneur, the parents opened a pancake house for their means of living. In part one, *In His Own Society*, Ralph Chang, the father was rather reluctant to assimilate to his environment. When his wife and two daughters could easily conform to the American culture, Ralph still kept his old customs and thought as if they were in China. When the other family members could use or wear anything it was common in the US, Ralph was still wearing his ten-year-old shirt, with grease-spotted pants since he still wanted his own society (Jen, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds.,1991, p. 155).

The customs was not only on the appearance. Though he was a succeed entrepreneur—as common in the Chinese Americans do—he still brought the family tie tightly as if he was in China. He treated his employees more like servants by ordering them to do trivial things that were not their responsibilities. He still embraced the patriarchy system in running his business and daily life, while his family members must follow what he said. Ralph even also would like to talk to juries when two of his employees were having trouble with immigration predicaments.

The cooks and busboys complained that he asked them to fix radiators and trem hedges, not only at the restaurant, but at our house; the waitresses that he sent them on errands and made them chauffeur him around. Our head waitress, Gertrude, claimed that he once even asked her to scratch his back (Jen, as cited in Brown & Ling, eds.,1991, p. 155).

Gish Jen also depicted the Chinese-American efforts to assimilate with American society. In part two, *In The American Society*, Ralph Chang's interaction was elaborated how he felt insulted with Jeremy's behavior that finally led him command his family to return home though

the dinner had not finished yet. Different from the husband who did not want to interact a lot with American society, Ralph's wife is narrated tried to join country club and she took the family to come to the club for dinner. Socialization means a lot for her and her daughters. Dhingra (2007, pp.55-56) mentioned that portraying themselves as like other Americans hopefully would help immigrants gain tolerance from outsiders for group differences. Ralph's wife and daughters realized that they must well-interact with other ethnic groups regardless they origins for their need as well.

Gish Jen elaborated how Ralph Chang is a hard worker person, like the typical of Chinese-American generally. In American society, Chinese becomes a model minority for all of the minorities. White American society has labelled Asian-Americans—especially Chinese—as model compared to African-Americans and Chicano/Latino Americans and touted Asian economic 'success' and achievement without any help from government. However, the success story of Asian-Americans seem to target other nonwhite minorities. Media depiction of the success concealed the racist reality and unequal power structure that have prevented minorities from improving themselves. Whites justified the concealed racism and mentioned that the US has applied meritocratic system. This opinion makes that inequality caused by racism has not been ceased yet (Chae, 2008, pp. 25-26).

D. CONCLUSION

There has been a lot of hyphenated American writings whose topics are those about racial discrimination, prejudice, stereotype, and interaction in the US. As the portrayal of a society, literature plays a significant role in defining society and its problems. From the examples of literary works above, namely *In The Land of The Free*, *Immigration Blues*, and *Soap and Water*, it can be seen that in the early period of the coming most of the situation the hyphenated-Americans experienced were about the immigration predicaments. The US immigration system is regarded to be unfair to the immigrants. Most immigrants who came to the new land with a lot of hope and success finally had to find the unequal treatments, threatening situations, which were quite different from their previous desire.

This condition is caused by the prejudice. The prejudice, ignited by stereotype, develops into discrimination. The discrimination would lead into social inequality, where the concept of we and they, dominant and subordinate emerges. In racial discrimination the White becomes the dominant, while the other is the subordinate, so that the dominant deserve to receive higher privilege than the subordinate.

In the part of interaction in the US, it can be seen that in *New Year for Fong Wing* and *In The American Society*, the main characters still thought of being in their own society. They still kept doing the old habits like in their origins, while their younger friends or family member tried to conform to the American culture. The earlier immigrants tend to tie highly to their origins, while the next generations do not. In this case, the earlier immigrants were still 'hyphenated Americans', keeping their ethnic identities.

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