# RACHEL CHU AS LIBERAL FEMINIST IN KEVIN KWAN'S CRAZY RICH ASIANS (2013)

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#### Abstract

This study aims to identify the characterization of Rachel Chu as a liberal feminist in *Crazy Rich Asians*, written by Kevin Kwan, published in 2013. By employing McKee's textual analysis with liberal feminism's perspective, the present study was designed in Miles' and Huberman's interactive model of qualitative data analysis. Through the repetitive and simultaneous process of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, the present study elaborates on the characterizations of Rachel Chu as an attractive, intelligent, and independent woman representing Rachel Chu as a liberal feminist. Thus, it is implied that although the novel may be fairy-tale-like in the sense that it is centered in a romantic love story with a glamorous setting of the affluent society in Singapore, the novel also inserts feminist traits that can inspire its reader to be intelligent and independent like Rachel Chu as the main character in this novel.

**Keywords**: characterizations, crazy rich asians, liberal feminism, the main character.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

*Crazy Rich Asians* is a bestselling novel written by Kevin Kwan in 2013. Despite being his debut published work, the novel made it into "one of New York Times international best-seller of 2013" (Le & Kang, 2019). As the novel climbed into success, it was adapted into a

romantic-comedy movie of the same title in 2018 and attained a tremendous financial success (Le & Kang, 2019). As the novel was acclaimed as an international best-seller, Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asian* has attracted scholars' attention to reveal the underlying issues behind its glamorous settings and romantic plot.

Rohmawati (2018), used a sociological approach to identify family conflict among the characters. Rohmawati (2018) found that the type of family conflict that appeared in the novel is family rejection, deceitfulness, extramarital affair, and harmful person into the family that often happened in real life. Ifada and Mufidah (2019) identified the elite community circle in the novel. Ifada and Mufidah (2019) explained that the rich person's social status in the novel could be seen from the pattern of consumption and social image maintenance such as education, interaction, first ovation, and club membership. Also, working on the socio-cultural aspects of the novel, Syva (2019) focused her study on the elaboration of social and cultural hierarchies. Besides, the maintaining of these hierarchies through the preservation of familial and cultural traditions was also elaborated. Going along these socio-cultural issues, the study conducted by A'Yun (2019) determined social prejudice reflected in the novel, and the novel was deemed to represent cognitive prejudice, affective prejudice, and conative prejudice.

The film adaptations have been scrutinized from a slightly different perspective than those applied in the novel. It is because it was considered to have been biased by western capitalism. It is very understandable, as film adaptation is an intricate work resulting from the interaction between the novel source, the trend in the market audience, and the convoluted process within the production of the film, hence it is a text on its right (Donaldson- Evans, 2009; Suwastini, 2014). Ridwan and Adji (2019) were interested in the characterization of Rachel Chu as the main character in the film adaptation of Kevin Kwan's Crazy Rich Asian by applying semiotics. They found that Rachel Chu was revealed as a staunch feminist as she set aside her emotions and resort to her intelligence and logic in solving her problems. Taking the film adaptation's more explicit preference of the American Culture, Vijay (2019) observed that the female characters' characterizations took a bias toward the American, neoliberal feminism as a more preferable. In a more critical setting, Yit (2018) analyze the positions of the female characters within the patriarchal capitalism in the novel, and revealed that most of the female characters in this novel took the subordinate positions in this patriarchal economy, where they usually place higher respect the male lines of the family while acting as a support system to their husbands' career. However, Yit also recognized an effort to undermine this structure by inserting a character like Astrid Leong to show that a woman could choose not to follow the patriarchal capitalism she was strong enough to face the dominant patriarchal discourse.

Feminism is an ideology concerning women's struggle to resist patriarchal culture to reach gender equality (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005). It is a belief that underlies women struggle to achieve gender equality by fighting unequal treatment. It is then a concept, study, and social movement that attempts to change society's belief of women's subordination, prioritizing the male perspective in a patriarchal society (Suwastini, 2013). Quoting Tong (2009) and Thornham (2006), Suwastini (2013) further summarizes that liberal feminism is one of the many streams in feminism that focuses on women's freedom of choice, in order to be equal with men. For Freidan to reach gender equality, women should be androgynous, where the masculine traits will help women assert their liberty and thus attain equality and fairness (as summarized from Tong, 2009). By possessing both positive masculinity (such as assertiveness, leadership, and

competitiveness) and positive femininity (such as nurturance, compassion, sensitivity, and cooperativeness) in both men and women, there will be equality between men and women because a person's psychological and social gender is not determined by biological sex (Tong, 2009).

Thus, Being intelligent is one of the characterizations of a liberal feminist (Tong, 2009). Rianto (2010) added that women as liberal feminists denied intellectual and moral differentiation between women and men (Hanifah, Zawawi, & Respatiyurisa, 2017). By those statements, women also have a right to get a proper education. A liberal feminist also considered to be independent (Tong, 2009). From a liberal feminism perspective, every human being created in an equal position, harmonious, and having the same potency and rationality. Women need to be independent in every aspect to be equal to men (Fakhrian & Islamiyati, 2017). This point rejected the stereotyping of women as the other gender after men. According to a study conducted by Fakhrian and Islamiyati (2017), liberal feminism supports women assertive. It is in line with Tong's opinion that women should be able to break the stereotype that women should be submissive, thus to be emancipated, women should be forward and assertive in their life choices (Tong, 2009). Therefore, liberal feminism trait is attractiveness because attractiveness helps women reach meaningful goals without being intimidating (Tong, 2009).

While highlighting the lifestyles of the super-rich Asian as signaled in the title, the plot development of the novel follows the love story between Rachel Chu and Nicholas Young, with Rachel Chu as the center of the focalization as Rachel Chu was introduced to the life of Nicholas Young who turned out to be one of those crazy rich Asian mentioned in the title. When the plot thickens as complications derived from the class difference between Rachel Chu and Nicholas Young's family, especially his mother, Rachel Chu asserted herself as a strong and intelligent woman and proven herself to be independent of Nicholas Young's financial status because she was a professional who earned her bread. Thus the present study focuses on the elaboration of Rachel Chu's most robust characterizations as a woman, using the perspective of liberal feminism.

### **METHOD**

The present study is conducted as a textual analysis following McKee's (2003) concept, through the present study, will elaborate on how Rachel Chu is represented as a feminist by using a liberal feminist perspective. The procedure of the analysis of the present study will follow the qualitative data analysis from Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of interactive cycles between the steps of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The present figure illustrates the process.

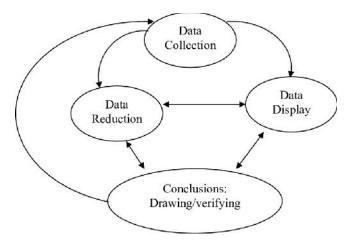


Figure 1. Flowchart of Qualitative Data Analysis from Miles and Huberman (1994)

As represented in the above cycle, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing are conducted simultaneously with the verification of the conclusion with the data collection. When the first attempt to analyze this novel is taken by reading the novel, it is immediately followed by the identification and classification of data. It is also conducted along with a plan of presenting the data in a report and conclude the analysis. All are conducted at the same time. In the first attempt, the conclusion may be very premature. Thus, the repeated back and forth between this preliminary conclusion, data display, data reduction, and data collection are conducted simultaneously until the analysis arrives at a consistent conclusion about Rachel Chu's liberal feminist traits.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Rachel Chu as an Attractive Woman

Being attractive refers to the expression of beauty. In Part 1: Chapter 4, Rachel Chu and Nicholas Young were planning their trip to Singapore. As Rachel Chu was browsing for airline tickets, it was described,

"As she sat there in the glow of the laptop, Nick couldn't help but marvel at how beautiful his girlfriend looked even at the end of a long day. How did he get so lucky? Everything about her from the dewy just-back-from-a morning run on the beach complexion to the obsidian-black hair that stopped just short of her collarbone conveyed a natural, uncomplicated beauty so different from the red-carpet-ready girls he had grown up around (pp.34)"

The narrator described Nicholas Young's thoughts on Rachel's beauty, which is in line with the findings from Pambudi (2019) about the description of Rachel's physical attraction. The word "beautiful" was directly written in the text. The quality of Rachel Chu in this quote is emphasized in two ways. The first is composing the expression in the adjective clause "how beautiful his girlfriend..." to erase the limit of the beauty. Furthermore, the beauty is emphasized that Rachel Chu"...looked [beautiful] even at the end of a long day," which means that she was not yet showered, maybe her makeup was already blurred that she was tired from work. However, with those conditions, Nicholas Young still viewed Rachel Chu as beautiful, that he

felt that he "[got] so lucky" to have Rachel Chu as his girlfriend. Furthermore, it is also emphasized that Rachel Chu's beauty was natural and straightforward as stated in "...her collarbone conveyed a natural, uncomplicated beauty so different from the red-carpet-ready girls he had grown up around," to differentiate the kind of beauty that was polished by makeup and high fashion from Nicholas Young's socio-economic status. This comparison between a pure and natural beauty that belongs to Rachel Chu and the "complicated" beauty of "the red-carpet-ready girls" further was an indication that Rachel Chu's beauty was more than surface beauty, but instead, could have been an attractiveness that comes out from a personality rather than mere appearance.

Daisy Foo, a friend from Eleanor Young's vibrant circle, also noticed Rachel's beauty and attractiveness. In Part 2: Chapter 8, she disagreed with Eleanor Young's unfavorable opinion toward Rachel Chu, and she interjected that,

"I have to agree with Philip. She was really quite pretty. Whether you care to admit it, Eleanor, your son at least has good taste," Daisy said, as she scrutinized the maid pouring her caffe latte."... [sic..] " "Astrid is a sultry, tempestuous beauty. This one is different. She has a simpler, more placid beauty," Daisy observed. (pp. 262).

In the above statement, Daisy Foo risked her friendship with Eleanor Young by setting herself against Eleanor in judging Rachel Chu's beauty. It means, Daisy Foo strongly felt that Rachel Chu was beautiful, and she was beautiful in a unique way. Her terms were "simpler, more placid beauty" supported by the finding from Ridwan and Adji (2019), who identified that Rachel Wu is described as a woman who does not pay much attention to her looks. These two terms placed Rachel Chu's beauty as uncommon and unique that she was not as beautiful as Astrid Leong, but she had her quality that made her attractive, and thus it was only standard that a man as handsome as, as rich as, and as qualified as Nicholas Young to have fallen in love with Rachel Chu.

Tong (2009) explained that women with beautiful appearances would be able to reach their goals, especially their dream job and workspace. Besides, sometimes the public likes to make their beauty categories (Hanifah et al., 2017). The beautiful appearance of Rachel Chu proven to grab others' attention or attract people to look at her. There was a stereotype of women as they only have a responsibility to take care of their family and do not have any chance to appear in public. However, liberal feminism believes that women and men are equal, independent, and free to decide their future (Suaidi, Rusfandi, & Wilujeng, 2016). Therefore, women have a right to take care of themselves to maintain their beauty. Rachel Chu seemed to have a natural beauty, which certainly helped her capturing the heart of Nicholas Young. However, as emphasized by the description of her beauty as "uncomplicated" by Nicholas Young, or "simple and placid beauty" by Daisy Foo, along with the contradiction between Rachel Chu's beauty with the "red-carpet-ready girls" that implies sophisticated makeup, hairdo, and clothing, the novel describes Rachel Chu's beauty as a strength that was in her personality rather than a made-up one. It means that Rachel Chu did not need or take much time to take care of her beauty, but she managed to stay attractive. It is one of the indications that Rachel Chu's beauty and attractiveness in Crazy Rich Asian is a feminist trait because Rachel did not sacrifice herself to get them, yet she could use them to achieve her goals.

### Rachel Chu as an Intellectual Woman

As the main character in *Crazy Rich Asian* (2013), Rachel Chu was identified as a smart and well-educated woman. In Part 1: Chapter 1, Rachel Chu was having a reflection about her life after Nicholas Young invited her to Singapore and met his family. It was described that,

"... Being twenty-nine, she was by Chinese standards well into old-maid territory, and even though her busy body relatives were perpetually trying to set her up, she had spent the better part of her twenties focused on getting through grad school, finishing her dissertation, and jump-starting her career in academia" (Kwan, 2013; 22)"

From the above stream of thought on Rachel Chu's mind, it can be observed that Rachel Chu had a high qualification. In her twenties, she finished her graduate school and her doctoral, thus by this time in the story, Rachel Chu held a master's degree and a doctoral degree. To hold a doctoral degree before the age of thirty years old is a fantastic accomplishment as an academician, and for a woman to achieve that before 29, she was highlighted as an overachieving female academician which according to the finding of Ridwan & Adji (2019), her achievement as an economic lecturer was a representation of her feminist character.

Further details about Rachel Chu's academic achievement as a reflection of her intellectual power are given in Part 1: Chapter 7, a conversation between Astrid Leong and Eleanor Young when Eleanor Young was prying about the identity of Rachel Chu.

"Not at all." What was Auntie Elle getting at? Astrid knew that her aunt was prying, so she felt like she had to present Rachel in the best possible light. "She's very smart and accomplished, Auntie Elle. I think you'll like her."

"Oh, so she's the brainy type, like Nicky."

"Yes, definitely. I'm told she's one of the up-and-coming professors in her field."

Eleanor was nonplussed. A professor! Nicky was dating a professor! Oh my, was this woman older than him? "Nicky didn't tell me what her specialty was."

"Oh, economic development."

A cunning, calculating older woman. Alamak. This was sounding worse and worse. "Did she go to university in New York?" Eleanor pressed on.

"No, she went to Stanford, in California."

"Yes, yes, I know Stanford," Eleanor said, sounding unimpressed. It's that school in California for those people who can't get into Harvard.

"It's a top school, Auntie Elle," Astrid said, knowing exactly what her aunt was thinking.

"Well, I suppose if you are forced to go to an American university—"

"Come on, Auntie Elle. Stanford is a great university for anywhere. I believe she also went to Northwestern for her master's[...]"

(Crazy Rich Asian, Part 1: Chapter 7, pp 54-55)

From the conversation quoted above, it can be observed that Astrid Leong, who was Nicholas Young's cousin and confidante, explained that Rachel Chu graduated from Stanford University, and her master was from Northwestern University, where the economic department was the best. Astrid Leong also considered Rachel Chu as "*She's very smart and accomplished*" to which Eleanor Young, who had decided to dislike Rachel Chu replied, "*Oh, so she's the brainy type, like Nicky.*" In this exchange, although meant unwell,

Eleanor's comment that Rachel Chu was "the brainy type, like Nicky" was an acknowledgment that Rachel Chu was smart and that her intelligence was equal with that of a man like Nicholas Young. Later, Astrid Leong explained that Rachel Chu was one of the *"up-and-coming professors in her field"* to emphasize that with her intellectual prowess, Rachel Chu would likely become one of the most successful ones in her field, which was economic development. Although Elinor Young then told herself that because Rachel Chu was a professor of economic and thus likely older than Nicholas Young and very calculating, it can be observed that for the general people, to be a professor in economic must take a long time and thus Rachel Chu must have been older than Nicholas Young. It indirectly highlights Rachel Chu's academic accomplishment as extremely good as she was not yet thirty and indeed not older than Nicholas Young, who was 32 years old.

Liberal feminists were inspired by equality in education as they fought one of its pioneers, Mary Wollstonecraft (Suwastini, 2013). Thus Rachel Chu's academic achievement in her studies and her profession explicitly marked her as a liberal feminist. With an explanation of Rachel Chu's profession as a professor at New York University, one of the top 50 world-rank universities, it is further emphasized that Rachel Chu held a public, paid profession. Thus, she was financially independent, rejecting the traditional roles for women to stay in the private spheres and financially dependent on their husbands (Sumar, 2015).

#### **Rachel Chu as an Independent Woman**

Being independent, especially financially, is one of the traits of a liberal feminist (Tong, 2009). As mentioned in the above discussion, Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* Rachel Chu was identified as an independent woman. As she was a college professor, she lived independently in New York on what she earned. She had her apartment, arranged her traveling, and managed the details of her finances very well. It is reflected in how Rachel Chu was responding to Nicholas Young's plan to take Rachel Chu to Singapore and stay there for ten weeks. The following is the excerpt from Part 1, Chapter 1.

"It all sounds amazing, but ten weeks ... I don't know if I want to be away that long," Rachel mused. She could sense Nick's eagerness, and the idea of revisiting Asia filled her with excitement. She had spent a year teaching in Chengdu between college and grad school but could not afford to travel anywhere beyond China's borders.

(Crazy Rich Asian, Part 1, Chapter 1, pp. 22)

From the above excerpt, at least three details can be observed concerning Rachel Chu's independence. First of all, it was mentioned that Rachel Chu had gone to Chengdu after graduating from college, but before she went on to take her master's degree in graduate school. It was also stated that she "*had spent a year teaching*," which means she went there to earn money. Although it was also stated that she "*couldn't afford to travel anywhere beyond China's borders back then*" which means that Rachel Chu earned quite limited amount of money, she did not have unlimited money, she could travel around China, though not "beyond the border of China." It not only implies that she was financially independent, but she was also independent in deciding where she would go.

In this novel, throughout her visit to Singapore, Rachel Chu has mostly considered a gold digger who dated Nicholas Young for his family's wealth. However, Rachel Chu ultimately has proven that it was not her reason. In Part 3: Chapter 15, Rachel Chu decided to break up from Nicholas Young because she could not stand how his family, especially his mother Eleanor Young, tried everything to set them apart and put Rachel Chu in the worst light possible. When Nicholas Young asked why Rachel Chu firmly decided to end their relationships, Rachel Chu responded:

"So, you'll have to understand that, as much as I love you, Nick, I don't want to be your wife. I never want to be part of a family like yours. I can't marry into a clan that thinks it's too good to have me. And I don't want my children to ever be connected to such people. I want them to grow up in a loving, nurturing home, surrounded by grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins who consider them equals. Because that's ultimately what I have, Nick. You've seen it yourself, when you came home with me last Thanksgiving. You see what it's like with my cousins. We're competitive, we tease each other mercilessly, but at the end of the day we support each other. That's what I want for my kids. I want them to love their family, but to feel a deeper sense of pride in who they are as individuals, Nick, not in how much money they have, what their last name is, or how many generations they go back to whatever dynasty."

(Crazy Rich Asian, Part 3, Chapter 15, pp. 365).

From Rachel Chu's statement, there is two crucial points to notice concerning Rachel Chu's independence. First, Rachel Chu emphasized the contradiction between "as much as I love you, Nick, I don't want to be your wife". In this statement, Rachel Chu admitted her feelings, but she decided not to go with her feelings. Instead of following where her heart was (that is, with Nicholas Young), she decided that she did not want to marry him. It is a declaration of independence earned from putting aside her feelings and using her logic to decide what would be best for life. As noted by Tong (2009), a liberal feminist would be rational and not dependent on her feelings. For liberal feminists, feelings and emotions are feminine traits that could hinder women's emancipation from patriarchy (Suwastini, 2013). Rachel Chu argued that she did not want to be part of the Young family, as she cannot "marry into a clan that thinks it's too good to have [her]." It is a statement that emphasized Rachel Chu as an independent woman, as she refused to be considered dependent on her (future) husband's wealth or to be considered of lower status.

Meanwhile, Ridwan & Adji (2019) also identified Rachel Wu's confidence in breaking up with Nick after Rachel considered their relationship logically. For Rachel Chu, Young's wealth could not buy her pride or independence. She would not give up her financially emancipated status to gain more wealth by marrying into the Young family.

However, Rachel Chu's reasoning to refuse to marry into Nicholas Young's family did not negate her identity as a woman, who would be a mother to her children. As a woman, she had foreseen that she would have children, and she did not want her children to be dependent on the family's wealth. She stated that "*but to feel a deeper sense of pride in who they are as individuals, ...[and], not in how much money they have*" which is a clear statement that she wanted their children to be financially independent. Here, Rachel Chu not only asserts her independence, but she also secures the independence of her future children. Furthermore, Rachel Chu stated that she did not want her children to be valued for "*what their last name is, or how many generations they go back to whatever dynasty.*" In this statement, the term "name" is closely related to the term "dynasty," which refers to the ancient name of the Shang Dynasty from which the Young family's wealth was originated. Thus, the name and dynasty in this statement are terms used by Rachel Chu to refer to financial wealth. In this case, Rachel Chu's refusal to be part of this family is not only a statement to maintain her financially emancipated status, but also a break from "inherited wealth" that was passed down from a male ancestor, that is, Shang Loong Ma, Nicholas Young's great grandfather. What is implied by Rachel Chu's rejection to be part of this family is a break from a patriarchal tradition that entails subordination of women who have to "marry into" the family and forsake their maiden family name.

#### CONCLUSION

From di above elaboration, it can be concluded that Rachel Chu, as the main character in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asian* (2013), was represented as a woman with three strong liberal feminist traits, with several liberal feminist traits, namely well attractive, intelligent, and independent. Her winning side is shown through her modest style, where she does not accentuate her looks. Supported with her intelligence as a young professor of economics, Rachel lives independently in New York. Her independence also allows her to get confidence in reconsidering her relationship as it may disrupt her. These three traits placed Rachel Chu as a robust liberal feminist that enabled her to maintain independence while attaining her goals and challenging traditional patriarchal gender bias. Thus, while the novel can be considered escape literature due to its captivating love story, it also shares a feminist ideology, especially the ideologies of liberal feminism, through the characterizations of Rachel Chu as its main character.

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