

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Globalization has increasingly shaped how people encounter culture, as international mobility and global media make cultural exchange part of everyday life, intensifying cultural flows and hybridization through which identities are continuously reconfigured across borders (Pieterse, 2009). Identity formation is thus characterized by hybridity and fluidity (Kipng'etich, 2024), a condition Bhabha (1994) frames as an ongoing negotiation of cultural difference, further shaped by how international media circulate images that influence perceptions of difference and belonging (Dembe, 2024).

Film plays a significant role in this process, producing meaning through images and symbolic systems rather than simply reflecting reality (Hall, 1997) and shaping how individuals understand themselves and others cross-culturally (Orgad, 2012). Transnational cinema studies further show that films depicting such encounters reshape identity through mobility and displacement, making film a useful medium for examining cultural identity in cross-cultural interactions.

Among these interactions, American and British identities present a distinctive case. Despite a shared history and language, clear differences remain in communication style, tradition, and emotional expression, with British culture linked to indirectness and American culture to directness and self-assertion (Gambo, 2025), tendencies

reflected in everyday language and humor rather than explicit statements of belonging (Li, 2024). Popular media draw on these patterns, depicting Americans as expressive and British characters as restrained and tradition-conscious through dialogue and behavioral cues (Zabalbeascoa, 2021), contrasts especially visible in narratives centered on cross-cultural encounters.

My Oxford Year (2025), adapted from Julia Whelan's 2018 novel, provides a relevant setting for examining these contrasts. The story follows Anna De La Vega, an ambitious American student who receives a scholarship to study Victorian poetry at Oxford while holding a structured plan for a career at Goldman Sachs. Her ordered life shifts after she meets Jamie Davenport, a charismatic British literature instructor, and their initial friction develops into a deeper connection. Anna eventually discovers Jamie has advanced cancer and refuses treatment, forcing her to choose between her ambitions and remaining in Oxford with an uncertain future, a narrative highlighting how cultural values and life expectations shape identity negotiation transnationally.

Anna's story adds another layer to this picture. She is the American-born daughter of an Argentine mother and a Cuban émigré father, placing her within a pattern already studied among second-generation Latin American immigrants, since American identity has always grown from many backgrounds converging over generations, the melting pot idea. Alba and Nee (2003, as cited in Chaney and Clark, 2020) describe classic assimilation theory as immigrants joining the mainstream by the third generation, but Chaney and Clark's (2020) interviews found this process does not erase where a family came from, with participants holding an American identity while

still carrying attachments to their parents' origin, a condition they call hybridity and Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2007) frame as double consciousness. For Anna, this layered history remains part of her even as she steps into Oxford.

Oxford University carries strong cultural significance tied to British heritage and academic prestige, a significance extending beyond merit alone. Access and recognition within elite institutions like Oxford have consistently been linked to class background rather than ability (Friedman and Laurison, 2019), with belonging shaped less by formal admission than by embodied familiarity with implicit codes those from outside the system rarely possess (Stenhouse and Ingram, 2024). Oxford therefore functions not merely as a setting but as a space where legitimacy is actively negotiated, the environment Anna must navigate as her American directness meets British indirectness and her career-driven ambition meets Jamie's more reflective outlook, raising questions about merit and recognition when her presence is read through diversity rather than achievement alone.

Research on cultural identity in film provides an important foundation for this study. Hall (1990) explains that cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as being, continuously shaped through discourse and interaction, meaning films actively construct identity rather than simply reflect it. Bhabha (1994) develops this through the "third space," a zone where cultural boundaries overlap and individuals negotiate conflicting norms and form hybrid identities. Contemporary transnational cinema studies further show how globalization and mobility intensify cultural encounters, making film productive for exploring identity shifts (Al-Maliki, 2025). Together, these

perspectives show identity in film is produced through ongoing negotiation, a framework relevant to *My Oxford Year* since Anna's experiences illustrate identity shaped through negotiation between her American values and the British norms she encounters.

Existing scholarship has begun to examine *My Oxford Year* as a site of identity formation. Fauzi, Adiningsih, and Rosalinah (2025) analyze Anna's personal development within Oxford's environment, though without addressing how American and British identities are represented through cinematic or cultural theory. Other studies offer relevant perspectives without focusing on the film itself. Syaniah and Lestari (2025) show how *Joy Ride's* Asian American characters navigate identity through mimicry, while Nurcahyani and Kamil (2021) find a similar "twoness" in *The Leavers*, together showing cultural negotiation emerging from everyday interactions. Sere, Muarifuddin, and Amalia (2022) examine *Black Panther* using Hall's constructionist approach, showing how film reframes identity through symbolic imagery, an approach useful here given how heavily *My Oxford Year* relies on representation.

Research on transnational cinema offers a further point of comparison. Andreas et al. (2024) analyze *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), showing how mimicry and hybridity appear across cultural groups, extending Bhabha's (1994) hybridity into a transnational setting and finding negotiation occurs in subtle, relational moments, a pattern relevant to *My Oxford Year*, where Anna's hybrid identity similarly forms through small moments rather than one decisive encounter. Despite this scholarship,

research on American and British identity in contemporary Western romance films remains limited, since most prior studies focus on postcolonial or diaspora narratives, and only a few examine American identity within a traditional British institution such as Oxford.

This limitation reflects a broader conceptual gap. The American-British relationship is often treated as a simple contrast, even though it is historically shaped by a postcolonial trajectory in which the United States became a dominant power, complicating the colonizer-colonized distinction since cultural authority is continuously negotiated (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2007). Encounters between American and British characters may thus reflect subtle hierarchy alongside cultural difference. This becomes visible in *My Oxford Year* through moments where Anna is implicitly positioned as naive when confronted by British peers on history or global issues, framing American identity as lacking depth against British intellectual authority, showing cultural hierarchy reproduced through everyday discourse rather than open conflict.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does *My Oxford Year* (2025) represent American and British cultural identities?
2. How does the process of the main character's identity negotiation emerge through cross-cultural experiences in *My Oxford Year* (2025)?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. To analyze how *My Oxford Year* (2025) constructs representations of American and British cultural identities through narrative structure, character portrayal, dialogue, visual elements, and Oxford as an institutional setting by using Stuart Hall's Representation Theory.
2. To examine how Anna's identity negotiation develops through her cross-cultural experiences in *My Oxford Year* (2025), particularly through in-betweenness, otherness, ambivalence, conflict, disruption, mimicry, cultural translation, and the emergence of a third space, by using Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of cultural negotiation and hybridity.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on analyzing how *My Oxford Year* (2025) represents and negotiates American and British cultural identities through its narrative, characters, and visual elements. The analysis centers on scenes that highlight interactions between these two cultural backgrounds, particularly those involving Anna De La Vega as she adjusts to the social and academic environment of Oxford. Guided by Stuart Hall's Representation Theory and Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of cultural negotiation and hybridity, the discussion is kept focused on how cultural meanings are constructed and how identity shifts as Anna encounters new cultural norms.

The data consist of selected scenes and dialogue that illustrate cultural differences in communication style, social etiquette, academic traditions, class codes,

institutional belonging, and emotional expression. Visual cues such as gestures, body language, clothing, setting, and symbolic elements are included when they support the interpretation of cultural identity. Although the film presents Anna as an American character with an Argentine mother and a Cuban émigré father, a background that reflects a pattern already studied among second generation Latinx individuals in the United States (Chaney and Clark, 2020), this study does not examine her Latin American family background as a separate object of analysis. Anna is analyzed primarily as an American character, and the discussion focuses on how her identity is represented and negotiated within a British academic and social environment.

This scope excludes the film's romantic genre conventions, its portrayal of illness, and technical aspects such as cinematography, allowing the study to provide a detailed and coherent understanding of how American and British cultural identities are constructed and reshaped within a transnational academic setting.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the field of cultural and film studies by offering a focused analysis of how *My Oxford Year* (2025) represents and negotiates American and British cultural identities, applying Stuart Hall's Representation Theory and Homi Bhabha's concepts of negotiation and hybridity to clarify how cross-cultural encounters are embedded in film narratives and how characters respond to cultural difference within a transnational environment.

The study also holds practical significance for understanding cultural dynamics in everyday life, especially as international mobility and global academic exchange become more common. Although the film presents a constructed narrative, Anna's experience reflects situations many individuals encounter when entering unfamiliar cultural environments, offering a clearer picture of how cultural negotiation operates on a personal level and how identity formation is closely connected to everyday experiences of cross-cultural interaction. This study may therefore provide insight for students, educators, and researchers in understanding how cultural encounters shape personal perspectives, relationships, and self-positioning, and may serve as a reference for future studies on transnational identity, cross-cultural interaction in film, and the representation of Western cultural relationships in contemporary cinema.

