

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of Study

Multicultural interaction is commonplace in a globalized world, leading to hybrid identities, which conflict with traditional ideas about national or singular identity (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996). In this sense, film is an important location for exploring belonging, coexistence, and cultural difference in modern society. Cultural representation and identity are becoming urgent issues within the context of English Studies; in fact, English studies now examine literature and media as cultural texts that convey socially determined meaning and ideological values (Sreevarsha 2024). As a result of this, films are now viewed as forms of literature that articulate contemporary identity and develop ideas related to value and struggle in the current world. To support this view, Stuart Hall indicated that identity is not a fixed quality of existence; it is therefore becoming a part of oneself through cultural history and representation; thus, evaluating the production of cultural narratives through the use of film as an instrument of literary analysis is a valuable method of understanding the construction and establishment of cultural identities.

Marc Forster weaves together all these pieces beautifully in the 2022 film *A Man Called Otto*. Otto, played by Tom Hanks, is a widowed white American male who has the opportunity to meet a new neighbor, Marisol (Mariana Treviño), and it changes his worldview toward others.

Throughout the film, the audience observes the importance of empathy and understanding of one another and the coexistence of cultural differences in a common suburban community (Jin, 2025). The transgender adolescent character, along with the various shapes and colors of his other neighbors, displays the film's multicultural fabric and illustrates the way the modern-day community reflects a multicultural reality.

Marisol's portrayal in the film also illustrates wider patterns recognized in academic work on Latino identity in the United States. As a Latina immigrant raising children in a bicultural background in a mostly white suburb, Marisol demonstrates what Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, and Szapocznik (2010) refer to as a multidimensional process of acculturation where immigrants and their offspring keep reconciling between their heritage-culture normative behaviour and culture of the receiving society instead of simply replacing one with another. Navigating this process is not always easy; it is not straightforward or one-directional. McKenzie et al. (2023) show that Latino adolescents and young adults tend to find their bicultural identity simultaneously strengthening and complicating since they have to deal with conflicting demands of their cultural family background and those of mainstream society. Such issues can be observed in Marisol's life as well. For example, she instructs Abbie to "use your English" in the course of preparing traditional Salvadoran comida – pollo mole, while she is constantly switching from one language to another depending on whom she is talking to.

The research conducted in this study applies two related conceptual frameworks in Cultural Studies: Stuart Hall's (1997) representation constructionist theory of representation, Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) notions of cultural hybridity and a third space. The two frameworks have not been applied parallel to one another but hierarchically. Hall's theory represents the primary framework, as it is the foundational analytical perspective used in the examination of the film's construction of cultural identity. The theories of Bhabha's hybridity and the third space represent the first supporting frameworks; in this way, they provide sharper insights regarding the intercultural encounter between Otto and Marisol. This hierarchy does not merely present itself as an arbitrary preference for the order of the approaches but instead signifies the existence of a particular structure inherent to the ways in which both approaches operate. Hall's approach is to be applied first in order to show how the film creates cultural identity. Hall's approach focuses on how to represent Otto, Marisol, and the neighborhood via using a number of signs, dialogue, images, and narrative techniques. Only after this step has been accomplished can we move to Bhabha's concept of the third space, since hybridity and ambivalence only occur between issues that have already been represented with the help of Hall's theory. To put it differently, Hall's theory offers represented material for Bhabha's theory. In the absence of Hall's theory of representation of Otto and Marisol in the form of cultural symbols, there will be no material for Bhabha to work with. The same sequence of research implementation is present in the research questions.

An explanation of why these two frameworks need to come together is necessary: The existing literature on cultural identity in the medium of film has generally used one theoretical framework only (Attiba, 2024; Sere et al., 2020); thus, limiting the ability to analyse the multiple, intersecting dimensions of cultural identity; specifically: its representational construction and its negotiation through intercultural encounters.

As Bhabha (1994) notes, the “third space” is a transitional area where cultural interactions can create new hybrid identities. Importantly, the third space does not act as a neutral middle ground; instead, it is a place fraught with ambiguity, tension, and disruption in which traditional forms of cultural power are challenged, and identities are both deconstructed and recreated. This theory can be used as a lens through which to examine *A Man Called Otto*, and they will help illuminate the themes of diversity, compassion, and coexistence portrayed in suburban North America today.

In *Otto*'s rigid identity (traditional, insular, and inflexible) we see a contrast with Marisol's identity, which can be seen as being fluid or flexible in nature, communal in nature, and existing within multiple cultures. Their relationship signifies what Bhabha (1994) refers to as “third spaces or places”, or an area whereby they each renegotiate their cultural identity while also risk making new cultural identities. In the graphic representation of both characters, we can illustrate how they step forward into the third space of identity transformation through existing differently.

They will not settle for a compromise, nor will they maintain policies of cultural accommodation; instead, they will undergo an experience of cultural transformation.

Prior research has looked into cultural identity and multiculturalism in films like *Cuties* (2020), *Nussa: The Movie* (2021), *Turning Red* (2022) and *Black Panther* (2018) (Purnomo et al., 2022, Hariadi et al., 2023, Attiba, 2024, Sere et al., 2020). However, many of these studies focused more on a specific ethnic/cultural identity or examined the movie from macro-level constructs such as nationalism and diaspora and only used one theoretical framework. Essentially, *A Man Called Otto* has already been analysed via frameworks of moral value (Zahra & Prastiwi, 2025; Uzira et al., 2023) and also from a mental health perspective (Lowe, 2023), but not culturally examining how *A Man Called Otto* relates to cultural identities through the text. The body of literature has very few (if any) studies discussing the cross cultural interactions in Western/mainstream films that have utilised the framework for a culturally different experience from a local community-based context and not from a global or diasporic context. This study will provide a means to conceptualise that gap in the literature by providing Hall and Bhabha as an integrated theoretical framework to analyse *A Man Called Otto* with the goal of creating a case study examining how *A Man Called Otto* contributes to community based multicultural representation in film.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does *A Man Called Otto* construct cultural identity through its representational strategies through Stuart Hall's (1997) constructionist framework?
2. In what ways does Otto's relationship with Marisol generate a third space of cultural negotiation?
3. How does this intercultural encounter construct identity transformation in both characters?

1.3. Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to investigate how *A Man Called Otto* represents cultural identity through Otto's slow evolution as he meets new people outside of his fixed world. In particular, it will focus on his relationship with Marisol, who serves as a point of entry into his own cultural negotiation and hybridity with Otto. Specifically, it will look at Bhabha's notion of the "third space" where their cultural and personal identities overlap, reconstituting or reshaping one another.

1.4. Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on 1 film, *A Man Called Otto*, analyzing it according to a qualitative textual model. The analysis will not venture outside the scope of examining identity representations, multiculturalism, and community expressions in this film as it has been represented by its characters, dialogue, and overall narrative structure. Technical or cinematic

aspects such as lighting, editing, or sound design, among others, may be mentioned briefly when relevant to the cultural representations interpretation process. This is not a study of generalization; rather, the chosen film is analyzed as a case study within Cultural Studies.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The study has both academic and social implications. Academically, the study contributes to the research area of English Literature by using Cultural Studies theory to analyze a pretty recent film, which supports the view of films as appropriate subjects of literary and cultural studies. Secondly, the study makes theoretical extensions to the work of Hall and Bhabha by demonstrating how their theories operate and function in the context of representing a multicultural society in a 21st-century Western narrative. Lastly, this study advocates for empathy and living together within a more multicultural society, which helps audiences understand how representation in the media can foster understanding between different communities.

1.6. State of the Art

This study utilizes three major frameworks in Cultural Studies to explore cultural identity and representation in *A Man Called Otto*. Stuart Hall's (1990) theorizing of identity as a process impacted by representation has been widely applied to diaspora cinema and Black British films (Prysthon, 2016); however, limited research uses Hall's framework in

relation to contemporary American multicultural narratives. Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity and the "third space," which has been largely utilized in postcolonial analysis of film and diasporic identity (ResearchGate, 2022), has not been applied to contemporary mainstream American cinema.

The original contribution of this research exists in the dual interfacing of Hall's representation theory and Bhabha's cultural hybridity and third space to analyze *A Man Called Otto*. Recent film studies have focused on multicultural representation employing single theoretical frameworks, for example, examining *Parasite* and *Nomadland* for cultural hybridity (Jin, 2024) or *Crazy Rich Asians* for multicultural narratives (Sugino, 2022). These pieces of research mostly separate theoretical frameworks rather than considering multiple frameworks simultaneously. By bringing these two theoretical frameworks together in a hierarchical and complementary manner — Hall providing the foundational representational lens and Bhabha deepening the analysis through intercultural negotiation and identity transformation — this thesis makes an original contribution to the fields of English literature and film studies in terms of how contemporary American cinema constructs and negotiates cultural identity through everyday multicultural encounters.