

SOCIAL CLASS IN KEVIN KWAN'S *CRAZY RICH ASIAN*

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Abstract

This research is aimed to analyze the protagonist's social class in Kevin Kwan's "Crazy Rich Asian." People are classified into different categories or levels in a similar position in the social hierarchy based on factors such as wealth, education, occupation, family background, and income. The protagonist's social class is middle class, from which she, Rachel, gets the negative impact of her boyfriend's family and friends, who come from the upper class. This research is completed using a descriptive qualitative method, in which the analysis and the findings are presented descriptively. The main data for this research are taken from the novel "Crazy Rich Asians." The findings of this research show that the social class of the protagonist is middle class, which is characterized by the way she dresses, her family background, and her amazement at the views of places that the upper class are used to visiting. Furthermore, the protagonist suffers because she is from the middle class. She gets mockery or ridicule from her friends, and she is rejected to be married by Nick, who comes from the upper class.

Keywords: *negative impact; protagonist; social class*

1. Introduction

Social prestige is the ability to judge a person's dignity or self-esteem through social means based on how he or she dresses, speaks, and other social values that most people can judge. *Crazy Rich Asians* is a 2013 satirical romantic comedy novel by Kevin Kwan. Kwan stated that his intention in writing the novel was to "introduce contemporary Asia to a North American audience." He claimed the novel was loosely based on his own childhood in Singapore. The novel became a bestseller and was followed by two sequels: *China Rich Girlfriend* in 2015 and *Rich People Problems* in 2017. A film adaptation of the novel was also released on August 15, 2018.

Crazy Rich Asian is a novel created by Singaporean American writer Kevin Kwan. *Crazy Rich Asian* tells the story of the wealth of Chinese people who are in Singapore with very abundant wealth, so that they are in a high social class, and they also like to interfere with other people's businesses and find out about someone's life. In this rich Chinese family, they really like it when there are people whose social class is as high as theirs, and they really do not like and are annoyed when they know people whose social class is lower than theirs.

Crazy Rich Asian tells the story of an American named Rachel Wu who has an affair with Nick Young, her student in college. Rachel Wu is invited by Nick Young to

attend his sister's wedding in Singapore, and after Rachel goes with Nick, Rachel does not think that Nick and his family are the richest people in Singapore. They own a business that has been passed down from generation to generation. It makes Nick and his family very wealthy. Then Nick invites Rachel to meet Nick's mother, but after seeing Rachel's dress style and way of talking, she does not agree because Nick's mother says she is from a not-rich family, while her mother wants to find a partner for her child whose economy is as rich as hers. There are two different social classes, namely the upper social class and the middle social class, which are from the Chinese race and have different social classes and have an impact on their lives (Nasution, 2021).

The story in the novel makes the researchers interested in making this research, particularly about the social status that might affect one's life. The researchers would like to dig into the moral lesson found through the research.

2. Literature Review

In general, social class is divided into three classes, namely the upper, middle, and lower classes. The first upper social class is a high social class that contains the rich and has a lot of wealth, and they are very proud of the wealth they have. They will also form relationships with those from the upper class, ensuring that there are descendants from rich to rich while also maintaining family stability. This class will try to maintain their privileges, power, status, and social position and will try to influence politics, education, and other institutions to protect and limit access to their members. In contrast to the upper class, the lower class had very different interests. They do not have a special form of capital that they need to protect. They are all eager to gain access to the resources and capital of a higher class. People who are in the middle social class only have wealth and are not abundant in the future, and they save more for the future. And the lower social class are those with the lowest income, which is very low, and usually the cause is a lack of education and poverty.

Social class is one form of social stratification. A social class is a group of people who divide people into different categories or levels in the social hierarchy. Wealth, education, occupation, family background, sex, income, religion, and other factors may be used to assign them to different levels. (Zerihun, 2005). Chinese life is indeed very famous for its glamorous life. Most of them are people who have a lot of wealth. Abundant assets owned by them can be categorized as inherited wealth; wealth that will never end, not even in a generation.

Social class is included as one of the components of social stratification as defined by the following: "Social stratification is the segmentation of society into different hierarchical arrangements or strata referring to the differences and inequalities in the socioeconomic lives of people in a given society" (Henslin and Nelson, 1995; Calhoun et al., 1994).

Social class is classified into three categories. They are: lower class, middle class, and upper class (Barry, 2002). The lower class is characterized by poverty. Those who are classified in this class are laborers and peasants. The people who belong in this class commonly live in rural areas, work in farms and factories. They live off the states' welfare and social spillover because they are very poor. The middle class is characterized as hard-working. They work as a doctor, an architect, an engineer, a manager, and a lawyer. They run their own business and employ people to work for their company. They are called hard workers because they are working to survive as proprietors of little companies. They might do it as a national subversion against the

economic system imposed by the bourgeoisie. The last classification of social class is the upper class. Those who are classified in this class are those who invest their money in a new business and those who inherit wealth from their family, which was extremely wealthy. Upper-class individuals invest their money in many multinational and transnational corporations either as investors or partners.

A researcher concluded in her research that there are some indicators of social class. They are types of work, income, educational level, fashion, transportation, and residence. Furthermore, women's attitudes toward men differ between the upper and middle classes. Women from the middle class tend to be aggressive, materialistic, and exaggerated towards men, while women from the upper class tend to be proud, arrogant, and underestimate men (Kristina, 2020).

The impact of social class might be on the attitude and the conflict in one's life. The conflict is potential to cause the oppression, injustice and alienation (Rapika. 2017). The depiction of social class issue is very clear in *Crazy Rich Asian*, where the upper-class who really likes to make parties which are certainly very luxurious and expensive are seen throughout *Crazy Rich Asian*. However, it can also be seen how people from the upper-class groups.

The impact of social class inequality is a social conflict that can occur within the family or their environment. In *Crazy Rich Asian* there are many social conflicts that become differences and disputes between families and between social classes. The conflict occurs when the middle class perceives itself to be extremely low (Nasution, et al, 2021).

When someone with a different background or different class wants to enter into a higher social class family, then conflict will take place because the upper social class will strongly refuse to have relationships or bonds with people who do not come from the same class. This is found in the *Crazy Rich Asian* novel (Berutu, 2021).

The impact of social disparity causes the lower classes to have low self-confidence because they always feel underestimated, insulted, and never considered in society. Furthermore, social jealousy between any groups with each other will cause discord in society. To resolve the social disparity problems, there should be awareness among the upper class to not always underestimate the lower class. People of the upper class should be able to judge people not because of their wealth but because of their attitude. So, the lower class will have the same opportunity to do things and will not feel excluded from their society. Therefore, it is suggested in one research concluding that we should accept a person with different character if he or she has the same mindset about social inequality. As a result, he disregards class or social status in his life and behaves well to everyone, despite coming from an upper-class social background (Widya, 2013).

3. Research Method

This study uses qualitative research as stated by Denzin and Lincoln (1994): "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry." They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. "Qualitative forms of inquiry are considered by many social and behavioral scientists to be as much a perspective on how to approach investigating a research problem as it is a method," By using this method, it means a qualitative

approach is used to describe social phenomena, life experiences, and situations to give them meaning and also to explore the behavior, perspectives, experiences, and feelings of people and emphasize their understanding of the elements. The main data is taken from Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asian* film and collected according to the subject matter analyzed in this research, referring to the theory adopted.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Social Class of the Protagonist

Social class is identified with one of the following social-class categories when they are growing up: poor, working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class. (Ortner, 1998). Those categories can be assessed by identifying the family income, parents' education, and parents' occupation.

The protagonist in the novel is Rachel. She is a member of the middle class because she is born into a middle-class family. It is indicated by the kind of work that her family does to support her. It is seen in the following quotations:

Kerry Chu is the character of Dr Rachel's mother whose mother is just a country girl from an ordinary family who works as a waitress at a cafe who works at night and suddenly there is a rich man who likes Kerry named Zhou Fang Min and finally they decide to get married but without anyone the approval of the Zhou family due to the disapproval of the Zhou family Kerry's marriage is ruined. "....." he was a complete unknown, the son of schoolteachers from the then middle class neighborhood of Toa Payoh. At first her parents were aghast and mystified by how she could have come into contact with someone from —that kind of background,she had chosen a fiercely handsome Armed Force Elite Commando who was a National Merit Scholar and a Caltech— trained computer systems specialist. It could have been much worse. (Kwan, 2013: 66)

The quotations above show that the protagonist, Rachel, comes from a family categorized as middle class because her mother is only an ordinary girl who works as a waitress at a café. And she works at night. It implies that the protagonist does not have much money and must work to support herself.

Another example of the protagonist belonging to the middle class is when she is on a plane. She claims that his apartment, where she has previously lived, is smaller than the room on the plane, which is filled with luxurious items. It is seen in the following quotations:

Rachel felt as if she was entering the screening room of a luxurious TriBeCa loft. The cabin consisted of two of the widest armchairs she had ever seen—upholstered in buttery hand-stitched Poltrona Frau leather—two huge flat-screen televisions placed side by side, and a full-length wardrobe ingeniously hidden behind a sliding burlwalnut panel. A Givenchy cashmere throw was artfully draped over the seats, beckoning them to snuggle up and get cozy. As soon as the stewardess was out of earshot, Rachel declared, "Sweet Jesus, I've lived in apartments smaller than this!" (Kwan, 2013: 74)

The above quotations imply that the protagonist is not familiar with the luxurious things found on a plane, which is commonly used by the upper class to travel. The quotations show that it is the first time for the protagonist to travel on such an elite plane.

Furthermore, it appears that the protagonist is not used to feasts, which are typically prepared by the upper class and include a variety of luxury foods. It happens when she is invited to have dinner by her friend. It is seen in the following quotations:

Rachel had never seen anything like this feast. “This is insane! Every dish looks like it came from a different part of Asia.” “That’s Singapore for you—the true originators of fusion cuisine,” Nick boasted. “You know, because of all the ships passing through from Europe, the Middle East, and India in the nineteenth century, all these amazing flavors and textures could intermingle.” As Rachel tasted the char kuay teow, her eyes widened in delight at the rice noodles flash-fried with seafood, egg, and bean sprouts in a dark soy sauce. “Why doesn’t it ever taste like this at home?” “Gotta love that burned-wok flavor,” Nick remarked. “I bet you’ll love this,” Araminta said, handing Rachel a plate of roti paratha.

(Kwan, 2013: 125)

Rachel tore off some of the doughy golden pastry and dipped it into the rich curry sauce. “Mmmm ... heaven!” Then it was time for the satay. Rachel bit into the succulent grilled chicken, savoring its smoky sweetness carefully. The rest of them watched her intently. “Okay Nick, you were right. I’ve never had decent satay until now.”

(Kwan, 2013: 99)

The quotations above show that Rachel has never seen the dish, which comes from a different part of Asia. The protagonist also emphasizes that she has never had this type of dish before.

Another situation showing that the protagonist belongs to the middle class is that she never sees large houses on sprawling lawns. Therefore, she gets so surprised. It shows a life full of luxury. The following are the quotations:

The neighborhood took Rachel completely by surprise, as it was the first time she had seen such large, old houses on sprawling lawns. “Most of these street names sound so British. Napier Road, Cluny Road, Gallop Road ...” Rachel commented. (Kwan, 2013: 131)

The quotations above show how surprised the protagonist is to first see such large and old houses on sprawling lawns. She is invited by his friend, who comes from an upper-class family, to that place, a very wonderful place showing a life full of luxury. If her friend does not accompany her, she will be unable to visit such a location because only the upper class has the opportunity and time to do so.

4.2 The Impact of Social Class to the Protagonist’s Life

The impact of social class occurs because of inequality, which might lead to social conflict. From the point of view of a social conflict theorist, Marxism, it is stated that social class and inequality emerge because the social structure is based on

contradictions, which trigger conflict. The impact of social class experienced by the protagonist Rachel occurs when she gets bad treatment from the Nick family, who come from a rich family from which her social class is very different. She comes from a different social class, whose social life is very different from the upper social class. The differences impact the protagonist's life. She is bullied and ridiculed by those who come from rich families or those who come from the upper class. She is also less confident in any communication or interaction. The following are proof of the impact of social class on the protagonist's life.

It is when the protagonist and Nick's grandmother are having a meal together. She is asked whether she was a professor or not by the grandmother. The first impression is that the grandmother gets surprised and feels so proud that Nick has a friend who is a professor. However, Nick's grandmother's impression changes when she knows that she graduated from Stanford University.

It was only then Rachel realized that Nick's grandmother had not touched any of the scones or finger sandwiches. Instead, she ate only a piece of *nyonya kueh* with her tea. "Tell me, is it true that you are a professor of economics?" Su Yi asked. "It is," Rachel replied.

"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." (Kwan, 2013: 47)

The above quotations show that the protagonist is looked down upon by Nick's grandmother because she graduated from Stanford University. Nick's grandmother spontaneously reduces her impression because she did not graduate from Harvard University. It implies that those who do not graduate from Harvard University must be those who do not come from the upper class. It is seen when she says that Stanford is a school in California for those people who cannot get into Harvard:

Other impact of social class is shown when the protagonist is mocked because of the clothes she wears. It is proved by the following quotations:

"Did you see what she was wearing? Where did she get that cheaplooking tunic top—Mango?" "How can you expect her to have any style? Think she gets it from reading American Vogue? Hahaha." "Actually, Francesca says that she's not even ABC—she was born in Mainland China!" "I knew it! She's got that same desperate look that all my servants have." "Well here's a chance for her to get some decent clothes at last!" "Just you watch, with all that Young money she's going to upgrade pretty damn quick!" "We'll see—all the money in the world can't buy you taste if you weren't born with it." Rachel realized with a start that the girls were talking about her. Shaken, she rushed out of the dressing room, almost colliding into Araminta. "Are

you okay?" Araminta asked. Rachel quickly recovered. "Yes, yes, just trying not to get caught up in the panic, that's all." (Kwan, 2013: 191)

The above quotations show that the protagonist is mocked and ridiculed because of her dress. She gets humiliated by the statement that she looks like a servant. Furthermore, those girls also say that money is everything in this world. Without money, someone cannot buy taste. And the money is with those who give birth. In other words, people with a lot of money should have come from an upper-class family.

Another example of the protagonist's social class impact is when she is deemed unsuitable for Nick's wife because she comes from a different background. Nick comes from the upper class, whereas Rachel comes from the middle class. The following are the quotations:

"....."I'm sure Rachel is a nice girl, but she can never be your wife."
"....." "She is just not suitable for you, Nicky. She does not come from the right background." "Nobody is ever going to come from 'the right background in your eyes," Nick scoffed. "I'm only telling you what everyone is already thinking, Nick. You haven't heard the horrible things I've heard. Do you know her family comes from Mainland China?" "Stop it, Mum. I'm so fed up with this ridiculous snobbery you and your friends have toward the Mainland Chinese. We are all Chinese. Just because some people actually work for their money doesn't mean they are beneath you." (Kwan, 2013: 436).

The quotations show that Nick's mom underestimates Rachel because she comes from Mainland China in which horrible life stories come from that place. Therefore, Nick's mom says that Rachel will never to be Nick's wife because she is not suitable for him because she comes from different family background.

Furthermore, the impact of social class is felt internally by the protagonist. She feels less confident about remaining in Nick's life, although they come from different family backgrounds. And they adore one another. Then she says that she never wants to be part of a clan that is too good for her. Therefore, she says that she will never marry Nick. In other words, she does not want to be Nick's wife because if she forces herself to be Nick's wife, then, there is no best place for them to live since mocking and ridiculing must be there if she enters the life of the clan from the upper class. The following are the quotations:

"....., Nick, I don't want to be your wife. I never want to be part of 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 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 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 individuals, Nick, not in how much money they have, what their last name is, or how money generations they go back to whatever dynasty. I'm sorry, but I've had enough. I've had enough of being around all

these crazy rich Asians, all these people whose lives revolve around making money, spending money, flaunting money, comparing money, hiding money, controlling others with money, and running their lives over money. And if I marry you, there will be no escaping it, even if we live on the other side of the world.....” (Kwan, 2013: 480-481)

The above quotations show that the protagonist feels unsure about being Nick's wife, who comes from an upper-class family. Therefore, she says that she will never be his wife. She is unsure if she should enter the upper class by marrying Nick. She thinks that if she insists on her relationship with Nick, there must be inconvenient treats from his family for her. And she might feel that inconvenience for the rest of her life, although Nick is different from them. Nick does not judge people based on their social class. He comes from a wealthy family, but he is gentle. Families from the upper class cannot accept people from other classes. Therefore, Rachel Chu does not want to marry Nickolas Young because she feels that she does not fit into his family and does not want to be bound by a family that won't be able to accept her.

Another situation that shows that the upper class cannot accept those who come from the middle class is when the protagonist would like to go to visit Nick. However, the protagonist's mother feels so worried about their family background because Nick comes from an upper-class family. Therefore, the protagonist's mother asks her whether she is really ready or not to meet Nick after some ridiculous behavior by the girls. The following is the quotation:

“..... —You know what will happen the minute you land to Changi Airport with this girl in your arm, don't you? You know how brutal it was for Michael when we 79 first started going out publicly. That was five years ago, and he's still getting used to it. Do you think Rachel is ready for all that? Are you ready for it? (Kwan, 2013: 39)

The quotations above show that the mother of the protagonist feels worry about her daughter's visit to Nick's house because it is known that Nick comes from rich family and commonly rich Chinese people limit their friendship and they are too selective in allowing other people to visit their homes.

The upper class consisting of rich people cannot make friend carelessly. They are very careful in considering to whom they may associate. It is seen in the following quotations:

What a coincidence! I'm so glad that you and Colin are friends.".....
"Colin, don't be rude! Nichola—"s is a classmate of yours, and we've known his family for a long time. Of course you are friend."
....."Colin has made so few friends since moving back to Singapore, and he's rather lonely, so we must arrange for you to play together."Colin was astonished by how friendly his can't have just anyone over, you know. We must know who the family is first. This isn't like California-you have to be so very careful about what sort of people you associate with here." (Kwan, 2013: 253)

The above quotations prove that people from the upper class do not associate with other people carelessly. They will consider who deserves to be their friends and

partners. It is critical to emphasize that the upper class is a closed group to which only the wealthy belong. As a result, the access to be part of them is limited and selective.

5. Conclusion

After completing the analysis of this research, the researchers arrive at two conclusions:

1. The social class of the protagonist is middle class. It is proven by the way she dresses, her family background, and her amazement at the views of places that the upper class used to visit.
2. The protagonist suffers as a result of his social class. It is demonstrated by the mockery or ridiculous behaviour of the upper-class girls toward the protagonist. Furthermore, she is also rejected for marriage by Nick's family, who comes from the upper class.

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