

CODA: Voices from Two Kinds of Marginalized People

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Abstract. Awarded the “Best Picture” at the 94th Oscars, CODA portrays two kinds of marginalized people: the hearing-impaired people and their hearing descendants. The hearing-impaired people are often the marginalized people who are “otherized” by the hearing people, also their binary opposites; while the descendants of the hearing-impaired people are also marginalized into a third space, since they cannot integrate into either side of the binary opposites. Combining the classic images of the two kinds of marginalized people in other films and works, and explaining the roles of the two kinds of marginalized people in the film with the theories of dualistic opposition and the “thirdspace”, we can better learn the survival plight of the two kinds of marginalized people, listen to their voices, and understand their tendencies of resistance and integration in face of the mainstream society and culture.

Keywords: CODA; marginalized people; hearing-impaired people; the Other; the thirdspace.

1. Introduction

The 94th Oscars witnessed CODA (adapted from the French film *La famille Bélier*) collecting the three awards of “Best Picture”, “Best Actor in a Supporting Role” and “Best Writing (Adapted Screenplay)”. In addition, the film scored 8.6 points on China’s “Douban Film”, a popular film review website among the netizens, and its freshness reached 94% at the “rotten tomato” website in America.

Undoubtedly, the achievement of CODA is closely related to the director, script, actors, music and other comprehensive factors, but the most impressive one is the portrayal of two kinds of marginalized people in the film, one is the hearing-impaired people, and the other is CODA, that is, the child of deaf adults. The film unfolds the plot from the perspective of marginal discourse, making the audience hear the voices from two kinds of marginalized people, and truly understand their tendencies of resistance and integration in face of mainstream society and culture.

2. Definitions for Marginalized People

The paper covers two kinds of marginalized people: one is the “otherized” group repelled by the mainstream society which is influenced by the binary opposition thought, the typical case being the hearing-impaired people in CODA, since they are the binary opposites of hearing people; the other can be concluded as “the third categorized” people, belonging neither to the “mainstream” nor the above “marginalized” group, the representative example here being the protagonist Ruby in the film. This part will introduce the two definitions and illustrate them with characters in other films and works.

2.1 “Otherized” Marginalized People

The thought of binary opposition is deeply rooted in western philosophies and religions. In Christianity, it is not uncommon to hear the oppositions of God/Devil, the Good/the Evil, spirit/matter. In Plato’s philosophy, there’s the well-known opposition between mind and body, with the former representing purity and immortality, while the latter, impurity and mortality. Descartes’ subject/object dichotomy is also familiar to us. Among these oppositions, the former is

always in the central and dominant position when compared with the latter. Under the influence of this kind of thought, it is easy to generate the self/other opposition hypothesis, which believes that “at the centre of personal experience is a subjective self which constructs everything alien to it as ‘other’. The opposition, sometimes phrased in different terms such as centre/margin or dominant/muted...” [1]. So the first kind of marginalized people here are the “otherized” party in binary oppositions, which can be frequently spotted in the best pictures of Oscars in recent years.

The “Academy Aperture 2025” issued in 2020 has added some new standards for “Best Picture”, many of which show concerns toward the “otherized” marginalized people. For example, the main storyline or the theme should be about the underrepresented groups such as women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+, and disabled people, and these groups should also constitute part of the actors and the crew. In recent years, the marginalized people-themed films become the focus of Oscars. *Moonlight*, the Best Picture of the 89th, narrates the life story of Chiron, a black homosexual from a slum; while *The Shape of Water* at the 90th pushes such marginality to an extreme: it is about the love story of the mute woman Elisa and a man-fish hybrid; it also includes other marginalized people such as the disabled, black people, gays...which satisfy all the requirements of “Academy Aperture 2025”. No wonder some reviewers claimed that it was its “political correctness” that won the recognition of the Oscars.

Anyway, Oscars’ concern for the “otherized” marginalized people is a positive trial for advocating tolerance, equality and diversified cultures in the film industry; *CODA* may also have benefited from this trial. Besides, compared with the original version which cast two healthy people as the deaf-mute characters, *CODA* recruited three hearing-impaired actors for the main characters, a practice much lauded by the deaf-mute group.

2.2 “The Third Categorized” Marginalized People

“The third categorized” kind is closely related to Edward W. Soja’s “thirdspace” theory, which tries to deconstruct binary oppositions such as center/marginality, white/non-white, man/woman within the postmodernist context. Distinguished from the binary opposites, a “thirdspace” is a “space of radical openness” [2]. In this space, the difference and diversity of the binary opposites are reexamined. “The third categorized” marginalized people here refer to those existing in such “thirdspace”.

In his research about marginalized people, American sociologist Robert Ezra Park has noticed how migration resulted in many marginalized people. He called them “cultural hybrid...on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused” [3]. “Cultural hybrid” is a good illustration for the characteristics of “the third categorized” kind, and the “margin” on which they exist is just like Soja’s “thirdspace”. “The third categorized” kind might exhibit two characteristics: on the one hand, they suffer from painful feeling of “cultural rootlessness” due to a lack of spiritual belonging; on the other hand, as a “cultural hybrid”, when compared with those of single cultural background, they find it easier to view the world with a tolerant, detached and objective perspective.

Don Shirley in *Green Book* (Best Picture for the 91th Oscars) is a representative of “the third categorized” marginalized people. As a piano genius with a PhD in music, he enjoys a luxurious life and his contacts are mainly from the upper class; yet he is a gay with black skin, which invites humiliation and discrimination everywhere he goes. Meanwhile, for lack of information about the popular music and food among common black people, he finds it also hard to integrate into them. Hence he desperately asks: “if I’m not black enough, and if I’m not white enough, and if I’m not man enough, what am I?!” Because Shirley cannot identify himself on either side of the binary oppositions of white/black, man/woman, he suffers from strong pain and loneliness.

Though not tortured by the issues of race or sexual orientation, the protagonist Ruby in *CODA* is also stuck between her hearing-impaired family members and healthy people. Living on the margin, Ruby’s mentality has changed from pain and loneliness, as that of Shirley’s, to openness and tolerance.

3. Voices from Two Kinds of Marginalized People

CODA has shaped two kinds of marginalized people that fit into the above definitions. One is hearing-impaired people that are “otherized” by those with healthy hearing; the other is the CODA Ruby, who exists between hearing-impaired and hearing people. With its unique way of narration, CODA makes the audience hear the voices of the two kinds of marginalized people and sympathize with them.

Ruby’s parents and elder brother are all deaf. Using sign language as a tool for communication, they can’t understand the world of the healthy people, let alone be understood by them. Because of this communication barrier, the family have no choice but to make a living by the laborious job of fishing. Like other bottom fishermen, their income is low because of being squeezed by the local fishery committee and other organizations. Worse than other fishermen, because they can’t exchange pricing with others, their catch prices are often lower than others. Hearing impairment is a thick wall between them and the outside world. They refuse to have too much contact with the outside world because they are afraid of being laughed at and rejected. Ruby’s mother even confessed to Ruby that when she was pregnant, she hoped Ruby also could not hear, because she was worried that if Ruby was different from them, their relationship would not be close enough. What impressed the audience the most in the film was the plot in Ruby’s concert. From other listeners’ expressions of tears and excitement and actions of cheering and applauding, Ruby’s family could sense that the audience enjoyed Ruby’s songs very much, but they could not personally understand the beauty of the songs. They looked at the reactions of the people around them awkwardly and at a loss, for they could not integrate into the atmosphere. The camera’s focus was then shifted to Ruby’s parents. At this time, the sound effect was suddenly cut off. Showing the perspective of the parents with hearing impairment, a silent moment of about one minute was inserted in the film. It was this pure silent treatment that reached the deafening effect. The silence formed a sharp contrast with the previous noisy scene and engaged the audience in the harsh world of the hearing-impaired people; finally, the audience heard the deaf people’s cries to establish contact with the outside world.

Born into such a special family, Ruby had been forced to grow up ever since she was a little girl. She had to bear the family burden early in life, for she had to help her family communicate with the outside world. Her father once sighed: “She (Ruby) was never a child!” Ruby could not enjoy the happy campus life like other children. Since her daily contacts were her hearing-impaired family, when she first went to school, she could not speak the way others did and her classmates laughed at her strange voice. Every day she had to get up early to help her father and brother go fishing, and when she managed to arrive at school, the fishy smell on her became the object of ridicule and the reason for exclusion from her peers. Ruby also couldn’t fit in at home. When she listened to music with earphones, her mother regarded the behavior as a sign of disrespect for other family members. Ruby loved singing very much, but such a hobby obviously cannot be understood by her family. With her music teacher’s encouragement, Ruby knew that she could realize her college dream by singing, but her family’s fishing business could not do without her, so she was in a dilemma: on the one hand, she wanted to pursue her singing dream; on the other hand, she wanted to accompany and help her family members. As a result, Ruby fell into a tangle like Shelly in Green Book. She could not find a sense of belonging either among the deaf or the healthy people. The song “Both Sides Now” she sang repeatedly in the film revealed her feeling: “I’ve looked at life from both sides now, from up and down and still somehow, it’s life’s illusions I recall. I really don’t know life at all.” Ruby was in a “thirdspace” and became “the third categorized” marginalized person. As Soya said, the “thirdspace” is full of radical resistance. How can Ruby resist, get out of the dilemma, and reconcile with her family and herself?

4. Resistance and Integration

With the development of the film, the fates of the two kinds of marginalized people have both gone through two stages: resistance and integration. For one thing, there is the resistance of the hearing-impaired people to the exclusion of the outside world and their efforts to integrate into the world; for another, Ruby, a healthy girl, broke the gap between the deaf and the hearing people, and finally won the support and recognition of both sides.

One scene in the film was about how Ruby's brother Leo tried to integrate into the circle of other fishermen by joining their gathering in the bar. But because he could not hear what others were talking about, Leo could only respond with a giggle in embarrassment and was thus insulted by a strong man. Out of anger, Leo knocked the man down, an action that unexpectedly gained him true love. In another scene, when faced with the constant pressure from the fishery committee, Ruby's father and brother stood up to protest, expressed their strong dissatisfaction with sign language and Ruby's translation, and persuaded several fishermen to cooperate with them to sell their catch together. Their bravery and determination earned other fishermen's admiration and trust. At the end of the film, other fishermen learned sign language, so Ruby's family could communicate with other fishermen happily in the sunshine, with long-lost smiles on their faces. The barrier between the deaf and the healthy people was finally broken.

Ruby has also kept resisting the marginal existence and tried to integrate into the world of her family and that of healthy people. The love of her family gave her the strength to move forward: her brother Leo promised that he could take care of the family, so that she can keep her singing dream; her parents also decided to support her to pursue her dream after participating in her concert. When she went to the university interview, Ruby was very nervous and didn't give full play to her potential, but when she saw her family, she regained her confidence. She began to explain the meaning of her lyrics to her family while singing, which was her unique skill in the "thirdspace". In this way of expression, she not only showed her singing ability to the examiners, but also kept the connection with her parents and brother. Finally, Ruby changed from a "third categorized" marginalized person to a link between the two dichotomous worlds. She built a bridge between the two worlds in the "thirdspace", and also made herself better integrate into both worlds.

5. Summary

In an interview with ABC news, Troy Kotsur, the actor who plays Ruby's deaf father in the film, also the first deaf winner of the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, expressed that "it's really important to show hearing people what it's like as a fly on the wall and immerse themselves in deaf culture." [4] Obviously, he did it. His wonderful performance on the screen made more hearing people understand the deaf culture and hear the voices of the hearing-impaired. At the same time, the special role of CODA has also caught the attention of the audience, arousing their sympathy and concern for such people. The film excels in its narration of love, both love within families and love between strangers, such a warm film will naturally resonate with the audience.

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