

Self, Society, and Repression in *Babel*: A Psychoanalytic Perspective

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Abstract

*As the prevailing studies tend to neglect how media depict the sociological question about the relationship between self and society and the dualism between pleasure and reality in modern society, this article examines this important issue by analyzing the award-winning film *Babel* by using a psychoanalytic perspective. Based on textual analysis of the film's storylines, this article argues that *Babel* not only substantially represents the relationship between self and society, but also depicts the continuing tension and dualism between them. This is seen in the storylines of its characters that illustrate the relationship between sexual drives and social regulations. For the sake of social interests and cultural production, pleasure is repressed by external reality and sexuality is repressed through socially sanctioned sexual regulations. The self must attempt to balance between libidinal desire and social control to enter the normality of the social world.*

Keywords

*Self, society, pleasure, reality, repression, film *Babel**

Intisari

*Terdapat kecenderungan pada kajian-kajian yang ada untuk mengabaikan kajian bagaimana media menggambarkan persoalan sosiologis tentang hubungan antara diri-individu dan masyarakat dan dualisme antara kesenangan dan realitas dalam masyarakat modern. rtikel ini mengkaji isu penting ini dengan menganalisis film peraih pernghargaan *Babel* dengan menggunakan perspektif psikoanalitis. Berdasarkan pada analisis tekstual atas storylines film tersebut, artikel ini berargumen bahwa film *Babel* bukan saja secara substantif merepresentasikan hubungan antara diri-individu dan masyarakat, melainkan juga menggambarkan ketegangan dan dualisme yang terus berlangsung antara keduanya. Hal ini terlihat pada storylines tokoh-*

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tokohnya yang mengilustrasikan hubungan antara dorong seksual dan peraturan sosial. Demi kepentingan sosial dan produksi budaya, kesenangan ditekan sedemikian rupa oleh realitas eksternal dan seksualitas ditekan melalui peraturan seksualitas yang disepakati. Diri-individu akhirnya harus berupaya menyeimbangkan antara dorongan libido dan kontrol sosial agar bisa memasuki normalitas dunia sosial.

Katakunci

Diri, individu, masyarakat, kesenangan, kenyataan, represi, film Babel

Introduction

Scholars from various disciplines such as sociology, philosophy and political science have studied the relationship between self and society, one of the fundamental questions about human society. Many of their studies explore how individuals need to adapt to society to be part of civilization through repression so that a civilized society can rise and sustain (Freud 1977; Marcuse 1987; Tangney 2003; Burkitt 2008). Undoubtedly, this literature has provided important insight into the understanding of the nature and dynamics of the relationship between individuals and society. Nevertheless, I believe, what appears to be missing from these prevailing accounts is an analysis of how media depict the dynamics of individual desires and social repression.

To fill this gap, this article attempts to analyze how media represent the complex and subtle relationship between self and society. In doing so, it focuses its analysis on how the award-winning film *Babel* represents the dynamic of the relationship between self and society and the dualism between pleasure and reality in modern society. The focused analysis will be on love or sexual desires and social repression from the psychoanalytic perspective as expressed in the storylines of Yussef and Zahra, and Chieko. The article argues that *Babel* substantially represents the relationship between self and society and successfully depicts the continuing tension and dualism between them for the sake of social interests and cultural production.

Data required for this study were collected through investigation that involved reading *Babel* synopsis, watching the film, and reading its storylines. This was done primarily to collect information about how *Babel* develops its narratives to represent the dynamic of dualism between self and society, particularly on the question about love and social repression.

Relevant collected data in the form of storylines, images, and synopsis were analyzed for categories, topics, and arguments in accordance with research questions. The method involved textual analysis of the collected data to uncover how *Babel* depicts the relationship between self and society in terms of sexual desires and social repression.

Drawing mainly on the views of the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, as its theoretical framework, this article examined the collected data to uncover the extent to which *Babel* constructs the dynamic as well as the subtlety of the relationship between self and society as seen in its narratives of individual

sexual desires and social repression. Within the context of self and society, *Babel* provides texts which can be analyzed to understand how these two are related and intertwined. The images and storylines of the movie selected for this study were analyzed to understand how a self's sexual desires need to be repressed so that society works as expected. This will reveal the extent to which how media contribute to maintaining or transforming the relationship between self and society.

In what follows, this article, first, describes some essential information about *Babel* and its storylines. Then, it presents its findings and explains how *Babel* represents the dynamics and subtlety of the relationship between self and society as seen in the storylines of its main characters. Finally, the article summarises its findings and its possible contribution to the related discourse.

About *Babel*

Babel, which earned its director, Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu, the prize for Best Director at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, is a film of four disparate families with different cultures and languages, but eventually interwoven with a hidden connection. This multiple story film was named *Babel*, literally means noise and miscommunication, to show the diversity and complexity of human languages that in turn make people difficult to understand each other. As Inarritu said, he named his film after a biblical story of people of Babylon who at that time talked and spoke one single language so that can could understand each other. They began to build a tall tower so that they expected to have direct access to heaven. One morning, God woke up and saw these people working and heard what they were trying to do: they were trying to be God. God said angrily: "I don't like this. I will punish those acts. They will speak different languages" (Paramount Pictures 2006). Regardless of this Judeo-Christian story, this film reflects the way modern society lives in which language diversity becomes a shattering barrier that separates humankind. It was intended to "invite us to get past the babble of modern civilization and start listening to each other" (Travers 2006). *Babel*, which was shot in three continents (Asia, Africa, and America) and four languages (Moroccan, English, Mexican and Japanese), concludes the trilogy of interweaving multiple stories films that the gifted Mexican director Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu and the remarkable screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga began with their two previous films *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams* (Travers 2006).

In *Babel*, there are four separate, but intersecting storylines (Lumenick 2006). The first, at the mountain village in Morocco, a goat herder (played by Mustapha Rachidi) bought a rifle and gave it to his young sons, Ahmed (played by Said Tarchani) and Yussef (played by Boubker Ait El Caid) to shoot jackals. The boys test the rifle innocently by shooting a passing tourist bus. Second, an American tourist couple, Richard (Brad Pitt) and Susan (Cate Blanchett), travel by bus in mountainous areas of Morocco. Third, in San Diego, Susan and Richard's two young children (Elle Fanning and Nathan Gamble) have been left with their Mexican nanny, Amelia (Adriana Barraza). As Amelia does not find someone to replace her in taking care of the kids, she unwisely takes them to Mexico to attend the wedding of her only son. The last, in Tokyo, a deaf-mute teenager Chieko

(Rinko Kikuchi) is grieving over the suicide of her mother, rebels against her father (Koji Yakusho) who pays little attention to her and acts out sexually with boys and a police detective.

The key event occurs when Susan, on a tour bus with Richard, is shot in the shoulder by Yussef and Ahmed who are testing a hunting rifle wildly from a hillside given by their father to shoot jackals. Media report the shooting as a terrorist attack on the American people. The impact spreads to Tokyo, where police detectives are looking for Chieko's father as he is connected to the gun that used to shoot Susan. Further explanation of the intersection of the ensemble storylines and the complexity of human communication in *Babel* is not interest in this paper. Rather, this paper is confined to analyze particularly the characters of Yussef and Zahra, and Chieko in terms of their sexual desires and social and personal realities that constraint the expression of their sexuality.

Pleasure and Reality in the Freudian Perspective

Where can we psychoanalytically locate Gonzales Inarritu's *Babel*? Picking up the storylines of Yussef and Zahra, and Chieko as a unit of analysis, I suggest the film can be read in the light of dualism between "pleasure principle" and "reality principle" or between sexual desires and repression. Since my interpretation of the film hinges on the distinction between pleasure and reality in the context of sexual desires, I begin with a brief explanation of these Freudian concepts.

Pleasure Principle

According to Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis and the great theorist of the human mind, the relation between self and desire can be traced to the early bodily experiences between an infant and its primary caretaker, particularly the mother. The small child depends completely on others, typically the mother, for satisfying its biologically fixed needs. Through their care, warmth, and nutrition, the infant needs others to survive. At this point, Freud says, the small infant does not make a distinction between inside and outside, between itself and the maternal body because it experiences the mother within a closed imaginary space and lives in a world which is totally different from structures of time and space to satisfy its natural needs (Elliott 2002:18).

However, for Freud, the infant's self-preservation goes beyond biological needs. After satisfying its biological needs for nourishment, the small child seeks pleasure by attaining libidinal enjoyment or what Freud called "pleasure principle". This is exemplified famously by the child sucking milk from its mother's breast. After getting the needed biological nourishment, the small infant experiences and develops a certain pleasure in the act of sucking itself (Elliott 2004:26). This, in Freud's account, is the emergence of the core of human sexuality, which is created and developed, not predetermined biological force at birth (Elliott 2002:18-19). For Freud, obtaining pleasure after satisfying biological needs for nourishment can be called sexual. Freud says: "The baby's obstinate persistence in sucking gives evidence at an early stage of a need for satisfaction which, though it originates from and is instigated by the taking of nourishment, nevertheless strives to obtain

pleasure independently of nourishment and for that reason may and should be termed sexual“ (Cited in Elliott 2002:26). Pleasure, in fact, is bound up with sexuality as needs are bound up with the pleasure of obtaining libidinal enjoyment.

In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud develops the theory of human sexual development, which is derived from the infantile sexual stages. First, the earliest stage of sexual life is associated with ‘labial zones’ as seen in the infant’s act of sucking milk from the mother’s breast (Wollheim 1991:113). This sexual development is called the oral stage. In this stage, oral pleasure becomes ‘erotogenic’ as the baby develops ‘fantasy-infused imaged deriving from the comfort of the breast’ (Elliott 2002:19). The oral stage links the opening up of other bodily erotogenic zones, the second sexual phase, the anal stage, where the infant obtains pleasure by letting or holding on feces; it experiences erotic pleasure through expulsion. Freud calls these two sexual stages ‘pregenital organizations’ (Freud 1977:116-117). The third phase involves the association of sexual drive or libido with genitals as expressed in the act of masturbation along with fantasies and self-sufficiency; this is the phallic stage of human sexuality. The important point of these sexual stages is, for Freud, that the infants create and develop an emotional relationship with their own body, other people and society (Elliott 2002:19).

Reality Principle: The Repression of the Pleasure-Seeking Self

In the stage of pleasure-seeking principle, the child develops sexual knowledge and experiences bodily pleasure with the mother. Besides, it also fantasizes about the sexual union with the mother in its closed and imaginary world (Elliott 2002:20). However, the imaginary world of the child-mother dyad and the fantasy of sexual union are broken through the intrusion of reality into this pleasure principle. At this point, the father’s presence represents the outside world or reality principle that breaks the mother-child dyad. According to Freud, the intrusion of the father means that external reality enforces harsh restrictions on the pleasure-seeking drives of the unconscious (Elliott 2002:20). Pleasure-seeking drives are repressed in the face of external reality. In this regard, civilization imposes severe repressions on the human pleasure-seeking (Elliott and Frosh 1995:193). The repression of the pleasure-seeking self, including sexual drives, plays a key role in the construction of social regulations and human civilization.

But, here emerges the Freudian moral imperatives. It is a task of the self, the ego, to balance its pleasure-seeking demands of the unconscious with social regulation and cultural constraints of external reality. The self must negotiate the shift from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, from the unconscious pleasure to the world of reality. Otherwise, the self can experience schizophrenic tendencies and other related pathologies (Elliott 2002:20-21). In addition, the uncontrolled expression of pleasure leads to interpersonal and social destruction (Frosh 1987:38). Yet, the surrender of pleasure to reality, Freud says, does not mean that the pleasure is defeated; the unconscious only suspends its immediate satisfaction of pleasure to obtain the long-lasting type of pleasure in the form of the unfolding of fantasy (Elliott 2002:21). Thus, the intrusion of external reality as represented in early childhood by the father suggests that conflict and ambivalence between pleasure and reality constitute a fundamental structure of human life.

Pleasure, Reality, and Repression in *Babel*

Babel represents the dualism between pleasure and reality, the conflict between the pleasure-seeking drives of human and external reality or between the self and society. It also portrays the repression of the self by the social regulations and controls. In particular, the film shows how sexual drives of humans are repressed and constrained by external reality, social restrictions and controls through mainly family institutions. In my view, a storyline of Yussef and Zahra, teenagers of a goat farmer in a mountainous and arid village in Morocco, represents a pleasure-seeking self in its pure and natural sense. This can be seen in the expression of their sexual drives, the basic form of human pleasure, which can be experienced by anyone regardless of the fact he or she lives with a poor family of a remote village. Stealing time from his duty of keeping goats grassing, Yussef sneaks to spy her sister, Zahra. Peeping through a hole in the wall of his brick-made house, he watches Zahra putting off her cloth. The camera yields the bare naked back of Zahra. Surprisingly, or interestingly, Zahra is not unaware of the act of her brother, even she enjoys, at least does not mind, her body is seen by her brother. Being aware that Yussef is peeping through the hole, Zahra turns her head around, as her back is bare naked, and smiles at him. It seems that they obtain pleasure and enjoyment through the act of peeping. This act for them can be an expression of their sexual desire, a catharsis of their pleasure-seeking unconscious.

However, Yussef and Zahra's pleasure is broken substantially by the intrusion of their brother, Ahmed. He gets angry with Yussef when he catches him spying on Zahra and grabs him to the ground. Yussef cannot accept this as he feels he does not do anything wrong.

Ahmed: "What are you doing? I told you, don't spy on her".

Yussef: "What do you care?"

Ahmed: "Move it!"

Ahmed can be said as the representation of external reality, the other, that intrudes the pleasure world of Yussef and Zahra. Furthermore, Ahmed can be regarded as the representation of wider social world when he calls them pigs and threatens to tell their father what they do.

Yussef: "Zahra doesn't mind".

Ahmed: "She doesn't, but I do".

Yussef: "This is between me and her".

Ahmed: "You're both pigs. Next time, I'm going to tell Dad".

Yussef: "Stay out of this!"

Ahmed: "If you want me to stay off it, don't do it!"

Yussef and Zahra's pleasure-seeking drives obtain further opposition from external reality as represented by their father who eventually notices what they do.

Father (to Zahra): "You got naked so your brother could watch you?"

Ahmed: "Zahra got naked many times, so Yussef could watch her. She's a street girl".

Father (to Zahra): “Is it true or not?”

Without waiting for her answer, he beats her on the head.

Yussef considers pleasure-seeking as expressed in his sexual desire as private and personal when he says to Ahmed that it is the matter of “between me and her” and asks him not to get involved. Yet, the pleasure-seeking self is facing opposition from the reality of the external world. Yussef is facing opposition and control from his brother and father, his family. At this point, family plays a role in imposing the reality of the external world, social control and cultural regulations on the self. As Erich Fromm says, “The family is the medium through which the society or the social class stamps its specific structure on the child, and hence on the adult; the family is the psychological agency of society” (Elliott 2002:48). In other words, the pleasure must surrender to the reality of the external world, meaning the self has to surrender to society. Nevertheless, the reality of the external world does not totally defeat the pleasure-seeking self; the self does not completely surrender to social regulations. The self finds another way to satisfy its pleasure drives. Sitting behind the rock, being away from Ahmed, Yussef does the phallic stage of sexual development as a substitute for his unsatisfied desire; he starts to masturbate.

The storyline of Chieko, a deaf-mute Japanese girl, can also be read in the Freudian concepts of pleasure-reality dualism and the relationship between emotional turbulence and sexual desires. The character of Chieko represents the severe imposition of reality on pleasure-seeking drives, in particular sexual desires. At a dental clinic, the dentist asks Chieko to open her mouth to check her teeth. When the dentist is checking her teeth and she is opening her mouth, she attempts to kiss him. He seems surprised about Chieko’s behavior, “What are you doing?” he says, but he keeps doing his job. Chieko then grabs his hand and press it on her genital –she is not wearing panties at that time. The dentist is very surprised and pulls his hand. “What’s wrong with you? Get out!” he says. Pleasure-seeking Chieko as expressed in her flaming sexual desires is facing opposition from reality as represented by the dentist who refuses to satisfy her instinctual libido. Pleasure can arouse anywhere to anyone as experienced by Chieko, but reality and society impose restrictions and opposition on it as represented by the dentist who regards Chieko’s sexual desire inappropriate as it is expressed in public space (the clinic), to the dentist (the public figure) and as she is just a girl.

This is also consistent with the scene where Chieko invites the police detective to her apartment to tell him about the death of her mother. The pleasure-seeking self in terms of sexual desires can be seen when Chieko asks him not to leave, after telling the detective how her mother committed suicide. Then, she goes to her room. The detective sees a reflection of Chieko on the glass of the apartment; approaching him, she gets fully naked. Chieko attempts to seduce him by touching his face and taking his hand to her breast. Yet, reality rejects to corroborate with pleasure. The detective refuses her seduction and says: “No, this is wrong. You’re just a girl. Enough, stop it!”. Though he may instinctively and unconsciously be attracted to her, he decides to refuse to satisfy her flaming sexual desires, her pleasure drive, but he lets Chieko suck his finger. At this point, he represents the agency of social control that it is inappropriate to express and

satisfy sexual desires with a young girl, at the time he is on duty, and in her father's apartment. Having her pleasure unsatisfied, Chieko attempts to find a way to relieve her suffering: she sucks his finger and cries.

Moreover, Chieko's pleasure drives are facing opposition from the reality that she is a girl with disabilities. At the club, a boy is approaching Chieko when she and her friend are playing video games. He attempts to say hello to Chieko and ask her to drink with him or let him join her, but she gives no response. Using a sign language, her friend asks him to speak a little slower. The boy is astonished and leaves them saying "excuse me". He gets back to his friends and says, "Asshole, how embarrassing!". Chieko sees them laughing.

Besides, Chieko's unsatisfied pleasure desires have an impact on her behavior. As Freud suggests, the turbulence of emotional life has a relationship with sexual desires and experiences of early childhood (Elliott 2002:19). Chieko looks unhappy, often loses her temper, and acts out sexually. The death of her mother who committed suicide and lack of attention from his busy father can be other contributors to her 'uncontrolled' behavior. But, in my view, the greatest problem results from the fact that she cannot satisfy her pleasure-seeking drives, in particular her flaming sexual desires. When her volleyball team plays the game, she protests against the referee's decision that ball is in; for her, it is out. She rejects by pointing her middle finger to the referee, an act that makes her sent off. Her impulsive characters can also be seen in her conversation with her friends (using a sign language) in the change room after the game.

First friend: "You shouldn't have lost your temper. We lost the game"

Chieko: "It wasn't my fault. It was the referee"

Second friend: "Why are you in a bad mood?"

First friend: "She always in a bad mood because nobody's fucked her yet".

Chieko: "I gonna fuck your dad to get rid of my bad mood!"

Her decision to take her underwear off and show the boys in the club "her hairy monster" is another example of the relation between her unsatisfied sexual desires and her emotional turbulence. Sitting at the bench in the restroom, Chieko looks upset.

Friend: "What's the matter?"

Chieko: "They look at us like we're monsters"

Friend: "Oh, come off it!"

Chieko goes to the toilet, puts her panties off and throws it in a bin.

Friend: "What are you doing"?

Chieko: "Now they're going to meet the real hairy monster".

Sexuality and Repression, Self and Society

The storylines of Yussef-Zahra and Chieko are consistent with the Freudian concepts of sexuality and social repression. Their sexuality, following Freud, is 'polymorphous perversity'; it is formless, purely pleasure which is independent of the idea of procreation or propriety, and able to flow in all directions and all

objects and bodily parts. Erotic love is private and not social as it is biologically “an element of the instincts, greedy, self-serving and hostile to the interests of the group”(Frosh 1987:44-45). In the case of children, their sexual life is richer than that of adults (Brown 1959 in Frosh 1987:45).

However, Yussef, Zahra and Chieko cannot satisfy their instinctual erotic love easily. Pleasure does not always win over reality. Society cannot tolerate the pleasure-seeking self and its uncontrolled sexuality; otherwise, human civilization is threatened to break up. Society, therefore, restricts sexuality and regulates what are socially accepted sexual expressions. Society forces the self, the child, who is narcissistic and auto-erotic animal, to accept others and certain appropriate sexual expressions and organizations (Hirst and Wooley 1982 in Frosh 1987:45). As a result, sexuality is repressed and regulated in the name of social control and for the sake of civilizations through certain sexual regulations. Freud argues that repression of sexuality is justified for the interests of society; this is the way for children to be social adults and our way to normality (Frosh 1987:46). In the view of Marcuse, basic repression, a minimum level of desire renunciation for the interest of social life, is indispensable. He argues: “A certain level of repression is necessary to produce a ‘socialized subject’, a subject capable of sustaining the business of social and sexual reproduction” (Elliott 2002:53). Even so, as Freud describes, social repression is a painful process for the social regulations of human sexuality constitute the recognition that society enters into the inner world of individuals and regulates what is regarded as private (Frosh 1987:46).

This is all that Yussef, Zahra and Chieko are facing; they must recognize the reality of the external world to enter into society and the normality of human life. They are forced to enter into the harsh reality of the external world. They are obliged to recognize the existence and significance of others, society. Their pleasure-seeking drives are repressed and regulated for the interests of civilization. But, their pleasures are not easily overcome by reality; their sexual desires are not easily beaten. They attempt to find a way as a catharsis to channel their sexual desires, though it does not fully satisfy their instinctual forces. In Yussef’s situation, he must satisfy his instinctual desires by masturbating and in Chieko’s, she must satisfy her flaming sexual desires by sucking the detective’s finger and hugging her father. Or, as Freud says, their sexual desires, their pleasure-seeking drives can take a new form of the unfolding fantasy. It seems that sexuality and repression, the self and society, develop a complex relationship, which cannot be put into a single category and description.

Conclusion

Babel depicts substantially the nature of pleasure and reality as well as their continuing tension, conflict, and dualism. It represents the relationship between human sexuality and social regulations. It also illustrates the relationship between the self and society. At the core of the relationship lies the idea of repression; for the sake of social interests and cultural production, pleasure is repressed by external reality and sexuality is repressed through socially sanctioned sexual regulations. An individual, the self, the ego, is not the master of its own home;

the self's pleasure-seeking drives are repressed in the face of harsh reality and its sexual impulses are restricted through certain sexual regulations. Since desire is deeply intertwined with the law and social order, the self experiences an internal conflict between the *id* (libidinal desire), *ego* (self) and *superego* (moral). Hence, Freud encourages self-control, the renunciation of unconscious desires by which the self must attempt to balance between libidinal desire and social control to enter to the normality of the social world. This is a painful human fate as experienced by Yussef, Zahra and Chieko. Yet, this is how society, where the self is its only member, works.

This article has contributed significantly to the relatively neglected studies of media and the relationship between self and society by providing insight into understanding the important question about sexual desires and society. Nevertheless, it is not a sufficient explanation to understand more the complex and subtle relationship between self and society. Therefore, further related studies are appropriately needed in our attempts to uncover how our society works and how media play their roles in maintaining or transforming the ways society works.

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