Representations of Hybridity in *Aquaman (2018)*: A Postcolonial Reading

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of hybridity in the film Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan, through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. While existing studies on Aquaman predominantly focus on mythological themes, heroism, or visual spectacle, limited attention has been given to its portrayal of postcolonial identity formation and hybridity. The purpose of this research is to analyze how hybridity is constructed through the main character, Arthur Curry, whose identity emerges from his dual belonging to the human world and the Atlantean realm. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this study analyzes key scenes, narrative moments, and character dialogues that explicitly depict Arthur Curry's negotiation of identity between two cultural worlds. The findings reveal that hybridity functions as the central mode of identity formation in Arthur Curry's character. His identity is articulated through an in-between position marked by cultural ambivalence and an unstable sense of belonging. The interaction between the surface world and Atlantis further operates as a third space that enables the negotiation of meaning and challenges rigid binary oppositions. Moreover, Arthur's character development demonstrates identity as a dynamic process of becoming, in which hybridity is continuously shaped and redefined rather than fixed. Overall, this study concludes that Aquaman (2018) can be understood as a postcolonial cultural text that represents hybridity as a fluid and ongoing process of identity formation within popular cinema.

Keywords: *hybridity; postcolonialism; third space; identity; Aquaman*

INTRODUCTION

This study argues that identity in postcolonial contexts is not fixed or singular but is continuously shaped through cultural negotiation, producing fluid and contested subjectivities. Such conditions require an examination of identity formation as emerging from encounters between different cultural spaces rather than from stable or essential origins. Within postcolonial studies, hybridity is a key concept introduced by Homi K. Bhabha to explain the cultural conditions that arise from interactions between cultures, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Hybridity, according to Bhabha (1994), does not simply refer to the blending of two pre-existing cultures, but to a dynamic process in which new meanings and identities are constantly produced through negotiation.

This process takes place in what Bhabha terms the *in-between* space, a liminal position where cultural identities are neither entirely one nor the other but remain in a state of transition and reinterpretation. From this perspective, occupying an in-between position should not be understood as a lack of identity or cultural deficiency. Rather, it constitutes a productive space in which meaning and subjectivity are actively formed. Bhabha (1994) further conceptualizes this condition as the *third space*, a site where dominant and subordinate cultures intersect, destabilizing fixed notions of identity, authority, and power. Within the third space, binary oppositions such as colonizer and colonized or self and other are challenged, allowing hybrid identities to emerge. Consequently, identity is understood as fluid, fragmented, and unstable, always in the process of becoming rather than being fixed or essential.

This understanding of hybridity is reinforced within broader postcolonial discourse, which emphasizes that postcolonial identities are shaped through historical encounters, power relations, and continuous negotiation rather than through unified cultural origins. Postcolonial theorists argue that colonial experiences generate ambivalent identities that occupy multiple cultural positions simultaneously, resulting in shifting and fragmented subjectivities (Sawant, 2012). In this sense, identity is best understood as a process rather than a stable category. Cultural texts, including films, therefore function as sites where hybrid identities are constructed, contested, and redefined within postcolonial conditions.

Film, as a cultural medium, frequently represents identity formation and social positioning within particular cultural and ideological contexts. A previous study titled *"Mimicry and Hybridity in the Film The Great Gatsby: A Postcolonial Study"*, published in *Jurnal Culture*, examines how mimicry and hybridity are reflected in the characters of *The Great Gatsby*. The study demonstrates that the main character constructs his identity by imitating the values, lifestyle, and behavior of the dominant upper class in order to gain social acceptance. The findings suggest that hybridity emerges through the character's attempt to position himself between two social classes, producing an in-between identity that is neither fully integrated into the elite class nor entirely detached from his original background. In this context, hybridity is represented as an unstable

identity shaped by class aspiration and social boundaries rather than as a fixed cultural condition.

However, this study is limited to a realist drama film that examines hybridity primarily through social class and lifestyle. It does not explore hybridity in films that involve fantasy settings, mythical elements, or characters who exist between two fundamentally different worlds or cultures. Existing studies on *Aquaman* (2018) have largely focused on moral values and ethical messages conveyed through the narrative and the main character (Priyoto & Priskila, 2023). While these studies highlight virtues such as bravery, responsibility, and compassion, they do not address Arthur Curry's identity as a character situated between the human world and the Atlantean world.

This limitation reveals a clear research gap in the analysis of hybridity within superhero films. Arthur Curry's dual identity as half-human and half-Atlantean places him in an in-between position that aligns closely with Bhabha's concept of hybridity. His struggle to negotiate belonging, authority, and legitimacy reflects the dynamics of the third space, where identity is shaped through cultural conflict and reconciliation. Therefore, this study applies Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity to analyze *Aquaman* (2018), focusing on how identity is constructed through Arthur Curry's experience of inhabiting two different worlds.

By moving beyond moral interpretation, this study offers a new analytical perspective that understands *Aquaman* as a postcolonial cultural text. Arthur Curry's hybrid identity demonstrates that identity is not singular or stable but continuously produced through negotiation, ambivalence, and transformation. Analyzing the film through Bhabha's framework thus contributes to postcolonial film studies by highlighting how popular cinema represents hybridity as a fluid and ongoing process of identity formation.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze representations of hybridity in the film *Aquaman* (2018), directed by James Wan. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, representations, and cultural phenomena embedded in a cinematic text rather than on numerical measurement. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of how hybrid identity is narratively and symbolically constructed through character development and cultural conflict within the film.

The primary data source of this study is the film *Aquaman* (2018). Secondary data consist of books and peer-reviewed journal articles related to postcolonial theory, hybridity, and identity, with particular emphasis on Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). These sources provide the theoretical foundation and support the interpretation of the film's narrative and visual elements.

Data collection was conducted through several systematic stages. First, the film was watched repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline, character dynamics, and visual symbolism. Second, scenes and dialogues were selected based on explicit criteria, namely: (1) scenes that depict Arthur Curry's dual affiliation with the human world and Atlantis; (2) moments of cultural conflict or negotiation between the two worlds; and (3) narrative segments that illustrate Arthur's struggle with belonging, authority, and identity. Based on these criteria, a total of ten key scenes were selected as the primary units of analysis, as they most clearly represent processes of hybridity and in-between positioning.

The selected scenes were analyzed using textual and contextual analysis grounded in Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial framework. Each scene was examined to identify how hybridity, the in-between condition, and the third space are articulated through Arthur Curry's actions, conflicts, and relationships with both humans and Atlanteans. Identity is interpreted as a dynamic process shaped by cultural negotiation rather than as a fixed or essential category. Through this analytical process, the study aims to demonstrate how *Aquaman* (2018) functions as a postcolonial cultural text that represents hybridity as a fluid and ongoing process within popular cinema.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study by analyzing selected scenes from *Aquaman* (2018) that represent hybridity, *in-between* identity, and the third space as a site of cultural negotiation. The analysis focuses on the main character, Arthur Curry, whose identity embodies the intersection of two distinct worlds: the surface world and Atlantis.

1. Hybridity in Arthur Curry's Identity

Arthur Curry's identity in Aquaman clearly shows hybridity because he lives between two different worlds: the human world and Atlantis. As the son of a human father and an Atlantean mother, Arthur does not fully belong to either side. In the human world, he is different because of his superhuman abilities, while in Atlantis, he is often rejected and considered unworthy because he is half-human. This situation places Arthur in an in-between position, where he experiences identity conflict and struggles to define who he really is. However, this hybrid identity later becomes his strength. By understanding both human and Atlantean perspectives, Arthur is able to connect the two worlds and challenge the strict boundaries that separate them.

Figure 1

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (05:25)

This scene shows baby Arthur Curry held by his Atlantean mother, Queen Atlanna, and his human father, Tom Curry. The subtitle emphasizes that Arthur is "living proof" that two different worlds can coexist. This scene visually represents Arthur's hybrid identity from birth, as he is biologically and culturally connected to both humans and Atlanteans.

1.1   In-Between Identity of Arthur Curry

Arthur Curry is portrayed as a character who exists within an *in-between* position, neither fully belonging to the human world nor entirely accepted within Atlantis. As the son of a human father, Tom Curry, and an Atlantean mother, Queen Atlanna, Arthur embodies cultural hybridity from birth. This dual heritage places him in a liminal position that reflects Bhabha's concept of hybridity, in which identity emerges through negotiation rather than inheritance (Bhabha, 1994). Throughout the film, Arthur repeatedly expresses reluctance to assume the role of Atlantis's king, indicating his internal conflict and fragmented sense of belonging.

Several scenes highlight Arthur's resistance to being defined by a single cultural identity. His life on land demonstrates his human values and emotional attachments, while his encounters with Atlantis expose his alienation from Atlantean political authority and traditions. This tension illustrates the instability of identity that characterizes the *in-between* space, where cultural affiliation remains unresolved and continuously contested.

Figure 2

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (05:30)

In this scene, Queen Atlanna expresses hope that Arthur could one day unite both worlds. This moment highlights how Arthur is burdened with expectations because of his mixed heritage. Instead of choosing one identity, Arthur is positioned as a bridge between cultures. This reflects Bhabha's concept of hybridity, where identity is formed through negotiation between cultures rather than fixed inheritance.

Figure 3

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (23:00)

This scene shows Arthur as an adult sitting in a bar with his human friend. Arthur jokes about his Atlantean ability to breathe underwater, but the setting clearly places him in the human world. The scene emphasizes his comfort with human life and values, suggesting that part of his identity is deeply rooted in the surface world, even though he does not fully belong there either.

Figure 4

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (23:01)

In this scene, Arthur continues interacting casually in the bar, drinking and socializing like an ordinary human. This contrasts strongly with his role in Atlantis, where he is treated as an outsider and a political figure. The scene shows Arthur resisting a singular identity and avoiding his Atlantean destiny, reinforcing his internal conflict and unstable sense of belonging.

Figure 5

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (23:45)

This scene shows Arthur in a reflective and emotional moment after being reminded that he was meant to unite the two worlds. His posture and expression suggest hesitation and doubt. This scene highlights Arthur's reluctance to accept the role imposed on him by his dual heritage, showing how his identity remains unresolved and continuously contested within the in-between space.

1.2 The Third Space as a Site of Cultural Negotiation

The interaction between the surface world and Atlantis in *Aquaman* represents what Bhabha conceptualizes as the *third space*, a site where dominant and subordinate cultures intersect and generate new meanings. Arthur functions as a mediator between these two worlds, negotiating conflicts that arise from environmental destruction, political power, and cultural misunderstanding. His ability to communicate with both humans and sea creatures symbolizes the emergence of a hybrid identity that challenges rigid cultural boundaries.

The conflict between Arthur and Orm further reinforces the operation of the *third space*. Orm represents a rigid and exclusionary Atlantean identity that views the surface world as a threat, while Arthur's hybrid position allows him to perceive the conflict from multiple perspectives. Arthur's refusal to fully align himself with Atlantis's imperial ambition reflects a form of resistance that destabilizes binary oppositions such as land versus sea and human versus Atlantean. In this way, hybridity becomes a space of negotiation rather than domination.

Figure 6

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (30:43)

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (30:50)

This scene shows Mera approaching Arthur in the human world and asking him to return to Atlantis. And Arthur's reaction reflects hesitation rather than immediate acceptance, indicating his internal conflict and uncertainty about belonging. The scene highlights how Arthur's hybrid identity places him within a third space, where cultural affiliation is not fixed but negotiated. Mera's request represents cultural negotiation instead of domination, reinforcing that Arthur's role emerges from his hybrid position rather than from a singular cultural identity.

Figure 7

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (30:58)

Mera explains that Arthur's half-brother, King Orm, is preparing to declare war on the surface world. The dialogue presents a clear divide between Atlantis and humans, showing how Orm sees the conflict as unavoidable. Arthur's quiet reaction suggests that he understands both sides without fully taking either one. This scene highlights the third

space, with Arthur positioned as the only figure able to negotiate the conflict instead of choosing domination or complete opposition.

Figure 8

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (31:00)

This scene shows Arthur turning away after hearing Mera warn him that "billions will die" if the conflict continues. Arthur's body language, facing away and leaning against the truck, suggests emotional resistance and internal conflict rather than readiness for action. The scene emphasizes Arthur's hesitation to immediately intervene, reflecting his struggle to reconcile his responsibility to Atlantis with his connection to the surface world. This moment highlights his position within the in-between space, where moral responsibility and cultural belonging remain unresolved.

Figure 9

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (31:02)

In this scene, Mera's statement frames the conflict as a struggle between two distinct cultural groups: the surface world and Atlantis. This line emphasizes that the conflict cannot be reduced to a single perspective because both communities are involved and affected. Arthur's presence in this moment positions him in a third space where his hybrid identity bridges these cultures, enabling negotiation rather than alignment with one side.

Figure 10

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (31:31)

This scene depicts Arthur expressing doubt about confronting Orm, indicating his awareness that the conflict between Atlantis and the surface world cannot be resolved simply through claiming the throne. His hesitation reflects an internal struggle shaped by his hybrid identity as both human and Atlantean. The scene positions Arthur within the *third space*, where cultural allegiance and responsibility are negotiated rather than fixed, and emphasizing hybridity as a site of cultural negotiation instead of domination.

Figure 11

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (31:38)

In this scene shows Arthur rejecting the identity of a king, as reflected in his statement, it signifies his refusal to fully assume Atlantis's political authority and imperial role. This rejection highlights Arthur's hybrid position in the third space, where he does not completely belong to either Atlantis or the surface world. The scene emphasizes cultural negotiation, as Arthur's identity remains unresolved and resistant to rigid power structures rather than aligned with domination.

Figure 12

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (51:07)

This scene shows Atlantean authority condemning contact with the surface world, describing it as being "defiled." The language shows how Atlantis views hybridity as something negative rather than a form of coexistence. This moment highlights the strict boundaries of Atlantean culture and contrasts them with Arthur's mixed identity, suggesting the need for a space where differences can be understood instead of rejected.

Figure 13

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (51:10)

This scene shows Orm confronting Arthur in the Atlantean throne room and referring to him as a "half-breed." The dialogue emphasizes the rejection of Arthur's hybrid identity and represents Atlantis's rigid and exclusionary cultural stance. Arthur's presence within this space places him in the third space, where human and Atlantean identities intersect and create cultural tension.

Figure 14

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (51:14)

This scene depicts Arthur standing before Orm and the Atlantean leaders without fully aligning himself with Atlantis's imperial ambitions. Arthur's visual and narrative position represents the third space as a site of cultural negotiation, where his hybrid identity challenges fixed boundaries between the human world and Atlantis.

1.3 Identity as a Process of Becoming

Arthur Curry's journey throughout the film demonstrates Bhabha's notion of identity as a process of becoming rather than a fixed state. Arthur does not immediately accept his role as king; instead, his identity develops through confrontation, self-reflection, and reconciliation with his origins. His eventual acceptance of leadership does not signify the abandonment of his human identity, but rather the integration of both cultural affiliations.

The final scenes of the film illustrate this hybrid resolution, as Arthur assumes his position as the King of Atlantis while maintaining his connection to the human world. This outcome reflects the fluid nature of hybrid identity, which remains open, negotiated, and dynamic. Arthur's leadership symbolizes the possibility of coexistence and cultural reconciliation, reinforcing Bhabha's argument that hybridity disrupts fixed identities and enables new forms of cultural meaning (Bhabha, 1994).

Figure 15

Aquaman (2018), directed by James Wan. (2:09:26)

This scene signals Arthur's final emergence as a hybrid leader. His public presentation before Atlantean soldiers shows collective acceptance, while his unchanged human

appearance suggests that he brings his dual background into this new role rather than discarding it. This moment shows that Arthur is accepted because of what he does and how others see him, and his identity grows from joining and being part of Atlantis, not because he was automatically meant to be king.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the representation of hybridity in Aquaman (2018) by applying Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, with hybridity positioned as the central framework of analysis. The findings demonstrate that Arthur Curry's identity is fundamentally hybrid, shaped by his dual heritage as both human and Atlantean. Rather than possessing a stable or unified identity, Arthur occupies an in-between position that marks the initial condition of hybridity, where cultural belonging is uncertain and continuously questioned.

The study further reveals that hybridity in Aquaman operates through a process of cultural negotiation that takes place within what Bhabha conceptualizes as the third space. Arthur's interactions with both the surface world and Atlantis position him as a mediator who does not fully align with either side. This third space enables the negotiation of meaning and authority, disrupting rigid binary oppositions such as human versus Atlantean and land versus sea. Through this process, hybridity emerges not as a form of weakness but as a productive space that allows new cultural meanings and possibilities of coexistence to develop.

Moreover, the analysis shows that hybridity results in identity being understood as a process of becoming rather than a fixed or inherited state. Arthur's gradual acceptance of leadership reflects the outcome of ongoing negotiation rather than the resolution of identity conflict. His final position as King of Atlantis does not erase his human identity but integrates both cultural affiliations, emphasizing the fluid and dynamic nature of hybrid identity. Overall, this study concludes that Aquaman (2018) can be read as a postcolonial cultural text that illustrates how hybridity functions as a continuous process of identity formation, negotiation, and transformation within popular cinema.

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