

**BINARY OPOSITION OF BLACK AND WHITE: THE POWER OF LANGUAGE
IN SHAPING IDEAS ABOUT RACISM**

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ABSTRACT

Discourse is a complete language unit in grammatical hierarchy that can be performed in a composition like novel, book, encyclopedia and so on. Nowadays, discourse is often used as the medium of power to legitimate something or action. The meaning of thing in a discourse is potentially determined by someone who has the power. In many aspects of life, a discourse never neutral or objective in revealing a phenomena. In this case, commonly a discourse is purposely designed and conditioned by dominant institution. Through the language in a discourse, some bad characters or images can be attributed to someone such as subversive, fundamentalist, terrorist, and so on. Such phenomena also can be found in the terminology of black and white in the discourse about racism. For example, in Oxford English Dictionary the word "black" before 16 century was associated with something bad, negative, and stupid. Black is a kind of color that describe the condition of terrible soul, the symbol of devil, or something dangerous, such as black magic. Black is identical as the opposition of white. In opposite, white always has connotation with good things, such as purity, God, excellence, etc. Binary opposition of white and black is continuously produced in the discourse about racism. Black people (negroid) are assumed inferior toward white (caucasoid). At the same time, language also contribute positive image toward people who have the authority (white supremacy). In that case, language is not only a grammatical system, but it leads to the conflict of interest. This paper is a result of library research toward a discourse about racism in the novels of Jacqueline Woodson. The research was conducted by using postcolonialism and deconstruction approach. This research is aimed at revealing: (1) how are the image about black and white constructed in the novels of Jacqueline Woodson. (2) What are the binary opposition, decentering and fixing points in that novels. The conclusion of this research shows that language is still powerful in shaping ideas about racism, especially in keeping the issues of black and white as binary opposition.

Key words: *power, discourse, binary opposition, racism*

A.BACKGROUND

Reality of existence in the world starts from a language. Meaning of a symbol which has been internalized in the social existence and mutually agreed is constructed on a language system. A language is an interest of its speaker. Those who have authority are in power to make and control the meanings of language. Through languages, individuals can construct images of other parties as terrorist, radical, intolerant and the other images portraying opposition against government. In the same time, language can also deliver the positive, kind, and precious images for the authorities. Therefore, language actually is not only about grammars but also about the interests of the authorities. In the New Order Era when individuals were labeled as communists, left-extremists, and the others, they would be eliminated politically and socially. Language is an expression of authority so that language is an arena for the authorities.

The role of authority and knowledge also emerge in the problem of racial meaning. Race is a biological human classification based on physical characteristics, such as skin color, hair shape, hair color, eye color, and the other physical characteristics. Oommen (1997:76)

divided human race into three big groups, such as: Mongoloid or yellow-skinned race, Negroid or black-skinned race, and Caucasoid or white-skinned race. On its development, race which is initially a biological fact shifts onto a social construction when people in a certain race claim that their race is more superior to the others. Meanwhile Moodod (2001:420) stated that race has scientific validity linked to social value whereas racism is belief of racial superiority enforcing occurrences of racial discrimination and attack. The racism reflects in the form of racial prejudice, labeling, and stereotype toward the other races, and racial discrimination.

Rationalization of white race supremacy toward black race in British society has close interrelationship with their background of language. This relates to the concept which has clung to their significations and perspectives on the term "black" itself. On the Oxford English Dictionary, the term of *black* before 16th century was associated with dirty, sleazy, stupid things. Having dark purposes was translated as purposes associated with bad, bringing to death and calamity, and so on. Black is a color which follows to psychiatric conditions, a symbol of humility and crime, a sign of danger and disgusting. Including in that concept of Blackness, the opposition to black is White. There is no word as well as white, as the opposition, each white person would have a black opponent and each sweet would have a bitter opponent. White and Black connote holiness and defilement; purity and sin; glory and humility; beauty and ugliness; generosity and evil; God and Satan. In this paper, the researcher will discuss how the power of language places black and white as binary opposition is shaping racism.

B.THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Post-colonialism is often called as a deconstruction method toward thought model of binary opposition. Besides that, post-colonialism can be deemed as a theoretical design to deconstruct the perspective of Western colonialist (also known with Orientalists) which humiliate the Orient or colonized people. The thought model of binary opposition settling in western knowledge, specifically the study of Orientalism always places the occidental positions, colonizers, self, and subject own the superior position opposed to Easterners. The Orient is colonized, outsiders, other, object which is narrated and so on. The modern Occident feels that they are different from the Orient who is deemed irrational, emotional, and less-civilized. Said (1979: 4) stated that orientalism is a way of thinking based on the difference between ontologism and epistemologist which was created between the Orient and the Occident. Orientalism is an occidental concept to dominate, reorganize, and rule the Orient and the third world. Post-colonialism is implemented to analyze the cultural characteristics which were born especially in the third nations or former colonies on the decade after the end of colonialism.

A deconstruction approach about a sign isn't different from a Saussure's theory, even the Saussure's theory is as a fundament. Saussure defined that a sign as a unity consisting of signifier and signified and the relation both of them is arbitrary. Because the sign system is rational and arbitrary, a language system doesn't relate to absolute truth. Moreover, deconstructionism by Derrida refuses the concept of sign which consists of signifier and signified as if the concept makes both of the substances or a logocentric-natured binary opposition. Logo-centrism always restores the source of truth in logos, words, thought, and God-sayings. Therefore, deconstruction doesn't offer the new center, but it try to track a difference operation which silently works in logo-centrism or logo-centric texts. Deconstruction is refuse toward this logo-centrism. It centers its affection to the continual attempt to destroy and abolish the center (de-centering) and then find fixations.

The method of research is formulated in several phases: preparation, data-collection, analysis, and presentation. The first phase is preparation, an initial step in which the researcher prepares material and formal objects linked to the chosen research topic. In this phase, the researcher reads the novels by Jacqueline Woodson. The second phase is data collection, a way to collect empiric facts from the novels linked to racism. The data in this research is qualitative data which is in discourse form (words, sentences, paragraphs, and utterances) about racism. The data collection is conducted by carefully reading Jacqueline Woodson's novels. When finding expressions about racism, such as: actions, appearances, thoughts, prejudice, clothes,

and anything conducted by the characters, the researcher writes down them as data. The expressions about racism are used as data by considering the discourse which encircles them. The third phase is data analysis conducted to look for the inter-data relation and categorize the data. The inter-data relation can be functional, intentional, clausal, and the other relations. This phase is conducted by selecting and categorizing the data about racism based on post-colonialism perspectives. Besides that, the researcher also analyzes how disputes found in the novels, background ideology, and position of colonial ideology on the disputes. After the analysis finish, the next phase is presenting the research result. Novels which have been interpreted and connected to post-colonial literary criticism are presented objectively in order to gain a description how the binary opposition between black and white reinforces racism.

C.RESULT AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing three novels by Jacqueline Woodson, the researcher finds that there is binary opposition between white and black. Besides that, the opposition also undergoes decentering caused by the inconsistency of the binary opposition. Additionally, the researcher also finds the attempts of fixing points toward that binary opposition and decentering.

Binary Opposition

Binary opposition which is central-natured in these novels shows the white skin race is identical to all goodness whereas the black skin race is identical to all badness. The first binary opposition found is that white-skin people are people who are responsible for their social environment, whereas the black-skin people aren't. The description can be showed in the following citation.

Back in Chauncey, there wasn't a whole lot of white people and the black people who lived there, most of them didn't care too much for white people. The white people living there were like my Daddy, he doesn't like black people and he'll say it right out. I don't know what's worse not liking somebodey because of their race or saying it right out. Both thing tear a person up inside. (Lena: 34)

The discourse above is the utterances of Lena (a white-skin person) who describes her hometown, named Chauncey. The town is a town which owns much mining. In there, there are white-skin and black-skin people. White-skin race, as her father, has high positions, whereas black-skin race generally works as unskilled labors. Lena tells that her racist-natured father doesn't like the black-skin people because they don't take a care with the society around. In this case, a white-skin character as a controller is described fully careful, whereas black-skin character is careless-natured.

The next binary opposition is a description of the white-skin people as beautiful and elegant images whereas the white-skin people are described as vile, dirty, and untidy. The image can be shown in the following citation:

"What's going on, Ellie?" my father said. "What's this about? There're plenty of boys living around you Nice Boys. "You mean white boys, Dad?" I mean more appropriate boys. My father look at me and look back at him without saying anything. I'd always loved him more than my mother and maybe that's why it hurt to hear him talk like that. (Behind You: 98)

The citation above is a dialogue between Ellie (a white-skinned teenager) and his father. Ellie has a black-skinned close mate. When his father knows their friendship, he can't accept it and he asks Ellie to cut off the friendship. His father's utterance "*There're plenty of boys living around you Nice Boys*" belongs to a racist expression showing that white-skinned people are inappropriate to interact with black-skinned people because the nice people are just white-skinned people. It is also empathized by another utterance from Ellie's father, "*I mean more appropriate boys*".

In these novels, the researcher also finds that white-skinned people is described having power, whereas the black-skinned people is poor, weak, powerless, and criminal. It can be seen in the following citation.

But I don't like the looks of those girls. I don't like their clothes, their eyes..... They don't have any money". There is something about them, he said. "The color of the skin" I cut in. "Yes", my father said. (I hadn't Mean to Tell You This: 67)

The discourse above is an expression of Lena's father who states that he doesn't like black-skinned people and he doesn't like their appearance and clothes. It happens because they are poor. The utterance "*I don't like their clothes, their eyes..... They don't have any money*" shows that the bad image of black-skinned people. The power and privilege of white-skinned people also emerge from political and lawful authorities, as described in the following citation

Something you don't see in New York, white cops going to jail for shooting a black kid. Most usually happens is they get desk duty until the hoopla dies down and then it's all back to how it was. The day those cops got sentenced, I swear everybody in New York that was over the age of ten stood somewhere with their mouths hanging open. Then a whole lotta people started cheering. (Behind You: 55)

The narration above shows that a policeman, in New York, wouldn't be sentenced to a severe punishment if he shoots a black-skinned person. It is considered as a minor procedural error and common procedure. This novel tells about a black-skinned man, Jeremiah, is gunned down by a policeman when he plays in the downtown. His parents feel loss as he is the only son. However, there is no decisive action toward the policeman. This tragedy shows that racism of anti-black-skinned race is still well-placed in the United States.

The next binary opposition which is classic enough and often appeared in inter-race social life is majority and minority problem. The similar case is also felt by a figure of Jeremiah (a black-skinned teenager) in his school:

Tuesday morning, I sat on the Percy stair counting faces, white, white, white, white, Asian, Asian, black, white. It went like that. When I got tired of counting faces, I took out some math homework and started looking it over, trying to wipe out the thoughts eating up my head. (Behind You: 54)

Jeremiah is a teenager who is often bullied by his friends in the school, Percy School. It happens because his white-skinned friends consider that he belongs to minority in his school so that he often becomes a target of racist derision. Jeremiah's mental anguish can be seen in the citation above.

Decentering

The novels by Jacqueline Woodson also show that the binary opposition between black-skinned race and white-skinned race undergoes decentering. In fact, not all of the negative images are completely justified in these novels. At least, this can be viewed that not all white-skinned people are racist and hate black-skinned people. This phenomenon can be seen in the following citation.

"I heard somebody say that whitetrash are the niggers of white people." I stopped dribbling the ball and look at him. He was staring off down the block as though he were expecting somebody. "I don't like yo usig the word nigger" how come it's okay to say whitetrash? Daddy put his hand on his waist and moved his lips to one side on his face. He was silent for a moment. Neither one's okay" he said. (I hadn't Mean to Tell You This: 27)

The discourse above tells how Lena can't accept the attitude of her family and school-mates who always hate black-skinned people. She remains to make a friend with her black-skinned friends even though her white-skinned friends dub her 'whitetrash'. She makes a stand against hate of black-skinned people and she doesn't like using the term 'nigger' because the term actually is a nickname which humiliates black-skinned people. This discourse shows that the figure of Lena is imaged as a white-skinned woman who is anti-racist and doesn't agree with the bad images embedded to black-skinned race.

Decentering of the binary opposition is also seen in this novel when white-skinned people who are negatively imaged turn out to be well-attitude and helpful toward black-skinned people as seen in the following citation:

I bit my lip remembering something else that one time Marie had said me and her dady were alike, because we wanted people to just be able to be peole. To just be able to live. And now here he was, making sure me and Dion had a home. A safe place to live.
(Lena: 129)

The discourse above is a Lena's expression. When her parents are divorced and her father goes away from their home, the life of Lena and her brother, Dion, is in constant difficulty. Initially, they try to go far away to another city for looking for their relatives. However, they don't find them until her black-skinned friend, Marie, hears the news. Finally, Marie asks her fathers to pick them to be invited for staying in their home. Lena is touched and declares Marie's house as a safe place to live. The attitude of Marie and her family assisting Lena shows the de-centering of binary opposition stating that black-skinned race is always bad and white-skinned race is constantly good.

Fixing Points

After discussing the binary opposition and de-centering in the novels by Jacqueline Woodson, the researcher will describe the analysis result about fixations found in the novels. The fixing points meant here is about how an inequality of binary opposition and de-centering between white-skinned race and black-skinned race should be overcome. Fixing points showed in this novel are a concept of unified nations which discriminate between races, or live without racism.

At Chauncey Middle School, black kids sat on one side of the cafetaria, the white kids sat on the other. Same in the classroom, you'd see the two or three white kids all huddled together. My daddy used to always say united we stand, divided we fall, and I truly think all the kids at Chauncey hadd daddies at home saying the same thing. (Lena: 34)

The discourse above tells how the white-skinned race and black-skinned race couldn't bond in one school named Chauncey Middle School, even in the cafeteria, they couldn't sit in the same chairs. The offered fixation is every parent should teaches their children about the concept of 'united we stand, divided we fall' as uttered by Marie that her father always teaches that concept "my daddy used to always say united we stand, divided we fall, and I truly think all the kids at Chauncey hadd daddies at home saying the same thing". If all of the parents in Chauncey teach it, the problem of racism will end.

Another fixing point found in the novel is about the awareness of racial equality linked to God's will, as found in the following citation.

We stopped in front of Lena's classroom. She peered in. We were a good fifteen minutes late. "He doesn't like many people," Lena said "Call this a nigger school. Say I am a nigger lover because I had this friend, you know. We was real tight, and she was a black girl....But if god wanted us to mix, he would've made us all one color." (I hadn't Mean to Tell You This: 40)

The figure of Marie tells how Lena as a white-skinned teenager is teased by her white-skinned friends as she bonds with the black-skinned people. However, Lena makes a stand that it's no problem when her friends call her nigger because of bonding with a black-skinned teenager. The fixation which is emerged is the utterance of Lena which states "We was real tight, and she was a black girl....But if God wanted us to mix, he would've made us all one color." It means that the racial difference shouldn't be a problem because it is God's will. Being black or white is God's will.

D.CONCLUSION

Novels by Jacqueline Woodson show that there is binary opposition between white and black. White is identical to goodness, such as: responsible, clean, powerful, and major behaviors. On the other hand, the image of black is always imaged negatively, such as: careless, dirty, criminal, and minor. Generally, the binary opposition is built in strengthening the racism of white-skinned people. Nevertheless, in the novels by Jacqueline Woodson, the binary opposition undergoes de-centering showed by the fact that not all of white-skinned people hate

black-skinned people. Moreover when the white-skinned people have difficulty, the black-skinned people help them. Finally in these novels, the author offers the fixing points on the unity concept "*united we stand, devided we fall*" and an awareness concept that the racial difference is God's will, *if god wanted us to mix, he would've made us all one color*. The two concepts are expected to be able to realize the peace social existence without racism.

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