

## **DISCOURSE PRACTICE ANALYSIS ON 'THE BLACKER THE BERRY', A NOVEL OF WALLACE THURMAN**

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### **Abstract**

This study was conducted to answer a question: how is the process of text production, consumption, and distribution in discourse practice behind the novel? It used a part of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach offered by Fairclough (1989). The framework is characterized as Bakhtinian theory of genre. In the process of text production, Wallace Thurman as the author of the story expressed his feelings and dedicated his admiration, praise, criticism, and condemnation for his society. In the process of text consumption, it was expected that the readers could get purification of their soul and the improvement of their self-assessment in how they define their selves, accept their selves, respect their selves, as well as, accept and respect others better.

**Keywords:** analysis, discourse practice, novel, text production, text consumption, text distribution, Bakhtinian, genre.

## A. Introduction

‘The competence of producing and understanding sentences in isolation does not help learners much to communicate – to get involved in both oral and spoken discourse’ (Rukmini, 2010: 1). Since 2004 the focus of language learning is not on isolated sentences anymore but it has been removed to a text. Discourse competence has become the most important competence that has to be mastered by the learners of a language. Consequently, there is a greater expectation for English teachers nowadays, who are at once as discourse analysts.

In my view, this study is a bridge which hopefully can relate English education and literature. Novel, as the text being analysed in this study, is one of the concrete forms of discourse as well as one of the concrete works of literature. Honestly, the choice of the novel is due to literary interest. ‘The Blacker the Berry’ is a 1929 novel by Harlem Renaissance author Wallace Thurman. It tells the story of Emma Lou Morgan, a dark-skinned African-American woman, who encounters discrimination by lighter skinned African-Americans, beginning in Boise, Idaho and ending in Harlem, New York.

‘The Blacker the Berry’ is one of the most influential novels, even controversial. For the first time in a novel, Wallace Thurman openly explored colour prejudice in the black community. There have been plentiful reviews and even criticisms addressed to both this novel and the author. Corresponding to this consideration, it is reasonable to conduct an analysis on ‘The Blacker the Berry’ \_a novel of Wallace Thurman.

## B. Literature Review

Some theories reviewed below explore the relationship between SFL, discourse analysis, and CDA. Halliday's *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL) became the basis of the early development of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) which was initially recognized as *Critical Linguistics* (CL) in the late 1970s. In Gerot and Wignell's view (1994: 6), SFL attempts to describe language in actual use. It focuses on texts and their contexts.

Discourse analysis means 'a variety of procedures for examining chunks of language, whether spoken or written (Allwright and Bailey, 1991 as stated in Saleh, 2008: 75). Discourse analysis is also defined by Phillips (2005: 5) as an interrelated set of text and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, which brings an object into being. Even though diverse methodological approaches are involved in the study of discourse analysis, all of them are committed to language in context.

Similarly, discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the context in which it is used (McCarthy, 1994: 5). Still, Cameron (2001: 13) suggests that discourse should be studied as language in use that is 'what' and 'how' language communicates when it is used purposefully in particular instances and contexts. Thus, language is used to mean and to do something and this 'meaning' and 'doing' are linked to the context of its use.

A previous study of discourse analysis on a novel was conducted by Brice and Marien (2010) that is on Buchi Emecheta's novel, 'The Slave Girl'. However, the study was aimed to find out the author's techniques in the handling of English. Meanwhile, both the novel 'The Blacker the Berry' and Wallace Thurman as the author

were ideologically reviewed by Haizlip (1995) but there was no linguistic evidence supporting it.

According to Fairclough (1989), CDA divides the analysis into three parts: analysis of the text, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, consumption, and distribution), and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice. Thus, the analysis of discourse practice here covers three processes: text production, text consumption, and text production. The framework is characterized as Bakhtinian theory of genre. More particularly, the theory of genre highlights the productivity and creativity of discourse practice and its realization in texts which are heterogeneous in their forms and meanings, the heterogeneity emanating from their inter textual; texts are constituted from other already produced texts and from potentially diverse text types (genres, discourses) (Fairclough, 1995: 2).

### **C. Method of Investigation**

Related to its aim, this study is referred as a qualitative-descriptive research in which qualitative-descriptive method was used in collecting the data, analysing the data and presenting the findings. The research unfolded the text under the analysis qualitatively and then described the discourse practice descriptively.

The data source of the study primarily came from the text of a novel written by Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, whose genre is African-American Literature. It was firstly published in New York by the Macaulay Company in 1929. The novel consists of five parts: Emma Lou (Part 1), Harlem (Part 2), Alva (Part 3), Rent Party (Part 4), and Pyrrhic Victory (Part 5).

The data were collected by mainly reading and intensively re-reading the text of the novel in order to get a

comprehensive understanding of its content. It became the basis for further steps of the study: the analysis of discourse practice using the Bakhtinian theory of genre to cover the processes of text production, consumption, and distribution.

## **D. Discussion**

As the part of CDA, the analysis of discourse practice applied the theory of genre which basically investigated text production, consumption, and distribution. Text production was investigated by exploring more about the producer of the novel, who was the author of 'The Blacker the Berry', Wallace Thurman. Text consumption was investigated by exploring the consumers of the novel, who were the readers and the reviewers. At last, text distribution was investigated by exploring the distributor of the novel, who was the publisher of the novel, Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Published in 1929, 'The Blacker the Berry' was controversial at that time as its author, Wallace Thurman, openly explored colour prejudice in the black community for the first time in a novel. He wrote the novel when he was still twenty-seven years old, young enough to be as critical as he was. The title was taken by Wallace Thurman from the Southern saying 'the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice'. For some, it suggested a sexual connotation, but for others it attached pride rather than mark of shame to dark skins.

Wallace Thurman was born in 1902 as a native of Utah. He graduated from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, moved to Harlem (New York), and became part of Harlem Renaissance. He wrote a play, three novels, and numerous magazine articles; became an editor of a black literary magazine, 'The Messenger', and

did scriptwriting for movies. He died in 1934 because of tuberculosis when he was thirty-two years old.

Wallace Thurman seemed to know well what he wrote about. There were many of his experiences as a black man translated into his novel. There were some parts of his self on Emma Lou. He revealed his feelings through Emma Lou's. Like Emma Lou, he was black; like Emma Lou, he was educated at the University of Southern California; like Emma Lou, he sought his fortune in New York; but he was not a woman. In addition, there was another part of his self on some minor characters of the story, such as Campbell Kitchen. He revealed what he thought through what Campbell Kitchen thought. Like Campbell Kitchen, he was a writer; but he was young and not a white writer.

'The Blacker the Berry' was the first art work of Wallace Thurman in literature and his masterpiece as well. As an individual, the novel was the expression of his feelings, the means of actualizing his self, the product of his long contemplation. As a social creature, it was a concrete contribution of Wallace Thurman for his society, what he could do to make his society better, through his admiration, praise, criticism, condemnation, and appreciation.

The people in Boise (Idaho), Los Angeles, and Harlem (New York) in 1920s are real vices of the consumers of 'The Blacker the Berry'. For them, the novel was actually addressed to. They were whom actually Wallace Thurman criticized. Stated in his novel, the people in Boise encouraged stupid colour prejudice. For instance, the blue vein group in Boise only respected fair-skinned persons. In fact, the people in Los Angeles and in Harlem proved the same colour prejudice as the people in Boise.

For some readers, by reading the novel, Emma Lou becomes them: “the black daughter”, blamed for her birth by her own mother; or “the black grandchild”, hated by her grandmother who loved her other lighter grandchild more; or even “the black one in the family and the neighbourhood”, deserved to be neglected. For some other readers, Emma Lou becomes them: “the black college student”, never included in any campus sorority; or “the black teacher”, laughed by other lighter teachers; or “the black applicant”, underestimated by a black employer; or even “the black consumer”, addicted by a product of bleaching cream. For still other readers, Emma Lou becomes them, “the black woman”, always victimized by worthless men.

In the May 1929 edition of the *Journal of Negro Life*, a reviewer who wrote about ‘The Blacker the Berry’, reflected her attitude by stating, “Mr Thurman has become a devotee of the most fashionable of American literary cults – that dedicated to the exploitation of vices of the Negro of the lowest stratum of society and to the mental debauching of Negroes in general.” She said that Wallace Thurman had created so “incredibly stupid character...with easy virtue and lack of fastidiousness...” in Emma Lou that the novel became an immature and socially awkward work. From all her assessment, it seemed that the reviewer wished the novel had not been written.

On the other hand, ‘The Blacker the Berry’ was regarded as a satire by another reviewer coming later, Therman O’Daniel. In his view, it was proclaimed by Wallace Thurman through the novel that black has the same beauty as any other colour and those who thought otherwise were foolish. An author named Shirlee Taylor Haizlip also stated on the introduction of ‘The Blacker the Berry’ that Wallace Thurman through his novel had empowered him to speak out against America’s pigmentocracy and to rail against intra-racial colorism. In

the last part of the introduction, it was stated, too, that the skin chromatograph had to be repositioned into a new horizontal bar with a dark brown as the centre colour, as agreed by scientists that humans are a shade of protein called brown; that the original colour of the first humans was brown.

After reading ‘The Blacker the Berry’, it was expected that the readers could get the purification of their soul. Moreover, it was expected that the novel could improve their self-assessment, how they define their selves, how they accept their selves, how they respect their selves, so that they could accept and respect others better. Just like what happened to Emma Lou, it was expected that the readers finally could win their own victory, that they could not be colonized by any power of domination.

‘The Blacker the Berry’ was firstly published in 1929 by Simon & Schuster, Inc. The novel was published not only in New York City in which the company was located, but also in other four big cities. Thus, the novel was firstly published in five different cities at once: New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, and Singapore. Actually, it needed enough courage to publish the novel since the novel, which carried the issue of colour prejudice, was controversial in New York at that time. W. E. B. DuBois predicted that colour prejudice would be the major problem of the twentieth century into the twenty-first century in America and in Asia as well.

Simon & Schuster, Inc. is a division of CBS Corporation. It is a publisher founded in New York City in 1924 by Richard L. Simon and M. Lincoln Schuster. It is one of the four largest English-language publishers, beside Random House, Penguin, and Harper Collins. Annually, it had published over two thousand titles under thirty-five different imprints. The following paragraph tells about the early years of Simon & Schuster, Inc., history.



In 1913, crossword puzzles first appeared in New York and soon became a popular feature in newspaper. However, until 1924, none of crossword puzzles had been published in a book. Therefore, Simon and Schuster ran the company to exploit the opportunity. In early years of the history of Simon & Schuster, Inc., it continued to be the pre-eminent U.S publisher of crossword puzzle books. Yet, as part of CBS, Simon & Schuster, Inc., later has become the primary publisher for books connected with various media owned by CBS, such as Mission: Impossible, Star Trek and CSI.

## **E. Conclusion**

It can be concluded from the findings on the analysis of discourse practice that the processes of text production, consumption, and distribution— were closely related to the author, the readers, and the publisher of the novel. In the process of text production, Wallace Thurman as the author of the story expressed his feelings and dedicated his admiration, praise, criticism, and condemnation for his society in order to make it better. In the process of text consumption, it was expected that the readers could get purification of their soul and the improvement of their self-assessment in how they define their selves, accept their selves, respect their selves, as well as, accept and respect others better so that finally they could win their own victory, not be colonized by any power of domination, like what happened to Emma Lou. In the process of text distribution, Simon & Schuster, Inc., had enough courage to publish the novel in five big cities—New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, and Singapore— since the novel carrying the issue of colour prejudice was controversial at that time.

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