

**THE ANALYSIS OF  
SOCIOCULTURAL PRACTICE  
BEHIND ‘THE BLACKER THE BERRY’,  
A NOVEL OF WALLACE THURMAN**

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**Abstract**

This study was conducted to answer a question: what the discursive events as instances of socio-cultural practice behind the novel are. It used a part of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach offered by Fairclough (1989). The framework is characterized as Gramscian theory of hegemony. It can be concluded from the findings on the analysis of sociocultural practice through discursive events that Emma Lou, who suffered most, who had been unconsciously colonized, was actually the only one who was in power, who was responsible, and who had the means and the opportunity to solve problems which were the domination of colorism. Colorism was identified as the major hegemony, while the minor ones were feminism and racism. This study has no direct contribution in language education but there was still an indirect pedagogical implication especially related to literary based curriculum,

as an invitation as an invitation for English teachers to empower the students to critically interpret various kinds texts.

**Keywords:** analysis, socio-cultural practice, novel, discursive events, Gramscian, hegemony

## **A. Introduction**

There is a greater expectation for English teachers nowadays, who are at once as discourse analysts. This is due to the fact that discourse competence has become the most important competence that has to be mastered by the learners of a language. Since 2004 the focus of language learning is not on isolated sentences anymore but it has been removed to a text for ‘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).

Novel, as the text being analyzed 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 color 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. In my view, this study is a bridge which hopefully can relate English education and literature.

## **B. Literature Review**

Some theories reviewed below explores 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. Eventhough 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. The framework in analysis of socio-cultural practice here is characterized as Gramscian theory of hegemony. The theory of hegemony highlights not only how power relations constrain and control productivity and creativity in discourse practice, but also how a particular relatively stabilized configuration of discourse practices ('order of discourse') constitutes one domain of hegemony (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 were used in collecting the data, analyzing the data and presenting the findings. The research unfolded the text under the analysis qualitatively and then described the discursive events as instances of socio-cultural 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 the discursive events as instances of socio-cultural practice behind the novel by using Gramscian theory of hegemony.

#### **D. Discussion**

The analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice was conducted by employing the theory of hegemony. Hegemony, as the main focus of CDA work, exposes the power of domination and the struggle against the problem. Hegemony is such a culmination point of domination in which the major character of the story, Emma Lou, was unconsciously colonized. Related to the analysis of the text that had been previously investigated, there were three problems that Emma Lou had the struggle against: colorism, feminism, and racism. Colorism was identified as the major part, while the minor ones were feminism and racism.

In the dictionary, the word “colour” is defined as “a quality of visible phenomena, distinct from form and from light.” However, reported by sociologists as well as anthropologists, individuals are ranked based on the colour of their skin. This hegemony, generally known as colorism, exists not only in pre-colonial Africa, but in almost all societies as well. In American society, it has existed not only among groups, but also within them; both inter and intra racial. Meanwhile,

the question why it has existed will never be definitely answered.

Since earliest recorded history, the colour of skin has been put vertically with “white” as the lightest colour at the top and “black” as the darkest colour at the bottom. Actually, it will not matter if “white” and “black”, light and dark, top and bottom are regarded equally and objectively. Unfortunately it matters so much since there is a measure ranging from positive to negative, from good to bad, from angel to devil, from valuable to worthless.

In ‘The Blacker the Berry’, the problem of colorism was labelled colour prejudiced by its author, Wallace Thurman. Intra-racial colour prejudice brought a great huge impact to the self-assessment of the major character of the story, Emma Lou Morgan; to how she defined herself. Actually, she defined herself by what she felt in her heart, thought in her head, and experienced in her soul; by what she saw in the mirror every day; by what her mother, grandmother, relatives, friends, teachers told her; by what the new people she met commented.

For a long time at least, the poor Emma Lou had been indoctrinated that she was worthless, that she has a little value, that she was to be underestimated, that she could never be successful due to her dark skin. There was only little respect left for herself. No matter the circumstance, she would always believe that it was due to her dark skin which brought her to the tragic moment of her life. She had little luck in most of the story and always blamed her suffering on her blackness.

Colorism was identified as the major part of the hegemony as it dominated more power from the whole story. It was the problem accompanying Emma Lou’s life, all the times. Since she was born, Emma

Lou had had to face it until eventually she could win her pyrrhic victory, in which she decided not to spend her life running away any longer and realized that she had to accept herself, all of herself, exactly as she was.

The next problem carried through the novel was racism. 'The Blacker the Berry' reflects America's preoccupation in 1920s that kept some people at the centre and devalued the rest. At that time, Negroes, having the dark skin, was the most marginal race compared to other races there, such as Western Europeans, Italians, Armenians, Spanish, Mexicans, Jews, Indians, etc. In the novel, there was a real description on racial slavery. Still, there were some conversations in the novel which revolved around race, such as the differences between a mullato and a negro.

Feminism was the last issue contained in the novel. It seemed that there was discrimination between boy and girl, man and woman, that it was much easier to be a black boy than a black girl; that being a dark-skinned man has been easier than being a dark-skinned woman. The major character of the story, Emma Lou, wished that she had been a boy, just as much as her own mother exactly wished. "A black boy could get along, but a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment," or even "If only you were a boy," were some of miserable phrases had often told and retold by her own mother. For almost all part of her life, Emma Lou thought that her mother was right, "Black boys can make go of it, but black girls..."

Emma Lou's mother did not have a dark skin. But, in her view, she was just a woman, a creature who was so weak and foolish that could be left by her husband, who was, in fact, just a black man. Emma

Lou's father left Emma Lou's mother as soon as after Emma Lou was born. A black man could leave a woman easily, but not otherwise.

Furthermore, Emma Lou noticed that all of the Negro leaders and members of the Negro upper class had light-skinned wives. On the other hand, it was stated in the novel that, "A wife of dark complexion was considered a handicap unless she was particularly charming, wealthy, or beautiful. An ordinary-looking dark woman was no suitable mate for a Negro man of prominence." A black man still could get a light-skinned woman but a black woman could not. That was why when Emma Lou could get a lighter-skinned boy, she did not care whether her boyfriend did not hurtfully love her, whether he only used her for monetary reasons and sexual satisfaction. She was unconsciously colonized. There was still a place in the world for a dark boy, but there was no place in the world for a dark girl.

Although there were some protagonist characters taking roles by giving suggestions, such as her Uncle Joe, Mrs Blake, Gwendolyn, and Campbell Kitchen, actually, it depended on Emma Lou herself, as the dark-skinned Negro Woman, that she could win her victory from the problems of colorism, feminism, and racism. In fact, Emma Lou, who suffered most, was actually the only one who was in power, who was responsible, and who had the means and the opportunity to solve the problem.

A long time ago in Indonesia, R.A Kartini felt almost the same feeling as Emma Lou's related to the issue of feminism. She even struggled against the hegemony not only for her own victory but also for the whole of Indonesian women's. As a result, Indonesian women have eventually deserved the same



right in obtaining education as Indonesian men have done.

Unfortunately, not all Indonesian women realise the real reason why Kartini did such a thing, what she actually meant to struggle. In Kartini's view, Indonesian women deserved to be educated not to be the rival of the men, not to get a higher position than their husband in leading the family, not to ignore their responsibility to be a good wife, either or not to neglect their duty as a good mother, but actually they deserved that since they were the first teachers of their children, the creators of an educated society, and the key of a leading nation. Ironically, most of Indonesian women nowadays seem to be maniacs of being career women who spend most of their time for working outside their home, who almost have no time for their family after working, who start working at early mornings and go home at late of nights, who do not care even if the baby-sitter replace their role as the mother of their children.

It is expected that Indonesian women can be powerful in their struggle against the hegemony of feminism of which power has reached its culmination point of domination. Otherwise, they will be unconsciously colonized and make other parties of their life –their children, their husband, their family–suffered.

## **E. Conclusion**

It can be concluded from the findings on the analysis of sociocultural practice through discursive events that Emma Lou, who suffered most, who had been unconsciously colonized, was actually the only one who was in power, who was responsible, and who had the means and the opportunity to solve problems which were the domination of colorism. Colorism was identified as the

major hegemony, while the minor ones were feminism and racism.

### **Acknowledgement**

The writer would like to dedicate her gratitude to Prof. Dr. Yahya A Muhaimin since he has given the writer a great chance to conduct this discourse analysis. The writer also would like to thank Dede Nurdiawati, M.Pd for being the best partner in improving the writer's academic writing skill.

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