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The Unstable Nature of Dominant-Subordinate Relation: Postcolonial Study Towards Thomas King's *The Colour of Walls*

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Abstract

Aboriginal/Indigenous peoples, cultures and works of literature (in the broadest sense) play a crucial role in the continuous growth of world literary and cultural studies. Indigenous writers advocate indigenous rights and address their concerns in works of fiction and non-fiction. Focusing on the correlation between the *dominant* (*center*) and the *subordinate* (*margin*) in Thomas King's *The Colour of Walls* (2013), the present paper aims to specifically investigate the *dominant-subordinate* interplay in the colonial discourse. So as to elucidate this labyrinthine network of relationships, Homi Bhabha's critical concept of hybridity is employed throughout the analysis process. The results indicate the unstable nature of *dominant-subordinate* relation in the story, where power-based relationships are subject to constant change. Accordingly, this process of cultural struggle provides a site for the *subordinate* to change their marginal position and to resist the *dominant*'s influence; ultimately, this process assists the *subordinate* to reclaim their own independent identity.

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INTRODUCTION

When enmity starts, empathy stops. Over the past centuries, Indigenous Peoples have uninterruptedly remained the target of assimilation attempts. The colonial discourse has tried hard to relegate indigenous peoples to the margin by making them deny their local beliefs, values, and ideas; that is how colonizer's assimilation attempts disrupt the indigenous ways of life.

> When we talk about colonialism in the modern world, we are really talking about the conquest and control of nonwhite, non-European peoples. When we talk about "colonies" and colonialism, we are usually talking about the lands settled by Europeans following the arrival of Columbus in 1492. They include Canada and its Indigenous peoples, the United States and Indians, Indigenous Australia, Maori Aotearoa (New Zealand), the native Pacific Islands, Indian Latin America, and Indigenous Africa. (Yazzie, 2000, p. 39)

It is abundantly clear that assimilation attempts have left their traumatic mark. Indigenous Peoples have resisted these practices of racial inequalities and tried to preserve their identity, especially through writing. In this regard,

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Shanley (2005) states "the proliferation of writing by American Indians from the late 1960s and early 1970s onward has resulted in an unprecedented body of written works, works in one way or another informed by oral traditions" (p. 234). The natives resisted the assimilation attempts and turned them into motive force to move forward; by giving a fresh impetus to the world literature, a new period of literary efflorescence began, as Lane (2011) asserts "The 1960s were crucial years in the establishment of alternative venues of publication, seeing the launch of many newspapers and periodicals, . . . they represent the beginnings of a new wave of Canadian indigenous writing in English" (p. 160). The originality of idea and novelty of style attracted a large audience from all walks of life. With the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), "Native American literature underwent a renaissance around 1968, and the current canon of novels written in the late twentieth century in American English by Native American or mixed-blood authors is diverse, exciting and flourishing" (Dennis, 2007, p. 1). By this opportunity, the works of Indigenous writers, including Indigenous literature crossed the borders. Needless to say, "Today's Aboriginal writers emphasize the importance of their oral cultural heritage both as a source of meaning in their lives and as a resource for their writing" (Kröller, 2004, p. 24). Indigenous cultures (in the broadest sense), including oral/written forms of literature must be properly acknowledged because they offer incomparable insights for peace-loving life today and a promising tomorrow for following generations.

Thomas King (born 1943) is among the most prominent Native writers in North America. He is widely acclaimed for his works of fiction and non-fiction. King extensively writes about the natives' rights, and employs symbols to criticize the inequalities against them. He speaks out about the discriminations against indigenous peoples; he asserts "A lot of my short stories really are morality plays. . . . All these are concerned with an issue of some sort that has pissed me off or caught my attention" (Gruber, 2012, p. 274). Nowadays, both his fiction and non-fiction works are widely discussed in literary courses in the academia.

As a progressive body of critical thought, postcolonial theory provides a sound understanding of complex interrelationships in the colonial discourse. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a thorough look at these intricate correlations. In the colonial discourse, the colonizer establishes himself in the privileged position (*center*) while the colonized is pushed to the *margin*. The colonizer is in the seat of power and seeks to distinguish himself from the colonized. The 'in-between' nature of hybridity reflects the *center*'s made-up dominion over the *margin* (colonized), and reveals the interconnection between the *dominant* (*center*) and the *subordinate* (*margin*). The concept of 'hybridity' discards this system of binary thinking and disproves the situation where the *marginalized* is supposed to accept his passive role and follow the colonizer without question. "Hybridity thus becomes a means of resisting a unitary identity, emphasizing instead multiplicity and plural identities, existing between cultures (native and colonial master's), in what Bhabha has called the Third Space" (Nayar, 2015, p. 92).

The Colour of Walls is the story of a character named Harper Stevenson who persistently requests his unnamed secretary, and a Native painter called Afua to paint his office walls "nice, clean white" (King, 2013, p. 88). Afua asserts that the walls are old; walls "have a history. Walls have a memory" (p. 87), so they cannot be whitewashed, but Harper insists that the office walls must be painted white. The next day, Harper gets a can of white color and starts painting the walls; he tried several times over, but the color did not change. At the end of the story, his office walls are finally painted white, but in return, his hands became dark.

Regarding *The Colour of Walls*, an analysis by Nicolaescu (2015) concluded that peace happens when diversity is acknowledged; otherwise, a multicultural society cannot be achieved. While Nicolaescu (2015) mainly focused on multiculturalism in Canada, the present article takes a different theoretical framework and widens

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its scope in addressing the serious challenges represented in the *The Colour of Walls*.

To investigate the cultural issues that Aboriginal/Indigenous peoples experience, the present study principally focuses on Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity reflected in his seminal book *The Location of Culture* (1994). With those reservations in mind, the present article is an attempt to come up with answers to the following question; based on Thomas King's *The Colour of Walls,* from *A Short History of Indians in Canada* (2013), 1) What is the nature of *dominant-subordinate* correlation in the colonial discourse?

METHODS

Postcolonial theory gathered the attention of public in the 1980s, especially by Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* (1978). As a Palestinian-American literary theorist, E. Said (1935-2003) reexamined the Western reading of the East, and brought forth a new critical analysis of colonialism. In *Orientalism* (1978), he asserts that the Western image of the Eastern 'others' is false and biased. The West defines the East as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal' " (Said, 2003, p. 40). In this respect, P. K. Nayar (2010) asserts

> The native is constructed as primitive, depraved, pagan, criminal, immoral, vulnerable and effeminate in colonial discourse. Such a discourse then constructs a reality where future European administrators would not only see the native through the lens of this discourse, but also enact policies or initiate political-administrative measures because they believe in the truth-claims of the discourse. Discourse becomes, in other words, the mode of perceiving, judging and acting upon the non-European. (p. 2)

Postcolonial theory unveils the colonizers' negative consequences on the colonized; it gives voice to the subordinate to bring their unheard stories to the surface. Hybridity, as one of the most important postcolonial theories, reveals the potential of the colonized to challenge the status quo. The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1995) states that when different parties (cultures) meet, cultural interactions happen, so both sides affect each other (p. 98). Since the oppressor and the oppressed live in where Mary Louise Pratt calls a 'contact zone', the cultural interaction is not a one-way path, but a two-way relationship in which each party affects the other one; this is where the colonizer and the colonized are in the "painful process of transculturation" (Ortiz, 1995, p. 102). In other words, the cultural contact/conflict between the *dominant* and the *subordinate* leads to a situation where the place of *self* and the *other* are perpetually changing; in that situation, the subordinate has the potential to challenge the dominant's power because of the ruling's unstable nature (Das, 2005, p. 367).

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) talks about what he calls a/the "Third Space of enunciation" (p. 37), that "all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" (p. 37), clarifying why "hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable" (p. 37). Bhabha's idea is crucial in postcolonial and subaltern studies because "recognition of this ambivalent space of cultural identity may help us to overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2013, p. 136).

Hybridity is a means to resist the colonization. By blurring the line between the *self* and the *other*, hybridity works as the strategy of the colonized to reclaim their own identity. Runions (2001) holds the view that "Bhabha envisions hybridity as a step toward freedom, using the very disavowal that holds discrimination in place . . . Hybridity can be used to reread and reorder dominant discourses, allowing for subaltern voices suppressed in the stifling of difference" (p. 95). In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha deconstructs the rigid binary opposition of colonizer/colonized and superior/inferior. He discusses the hybridity of cultures meaning the "mixed-ness, or even 'impurity' of cultures – so long as we don't imagine that any culture is really pure. This term refers to an original mixed-ness within every form of identity" (Huddart, 2006, p. 4). Bhabha rejects the

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strict colonizer-colonized opposition of which both sides have immutable identities. He opposes the idea that colonial discourse is an invariable state, and believes in its flowing nature (Nayar, 2010, p. 27). Bhabha disproves the polarity of *self* vs *other*, and declines the purity of cultures; he, instead, proposes the idea of constant interaction between them. As a result, there exists no pure and intact culture. In this regard, Loomba (1998) argues that because of the interconnected circumstance of both dominant and subordinate in the colonial discourse, their identities are always subject to change (p. 178).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The two main characters of the story, Afua and Harper represent two different worldviews: While Afua encourages respect for, and appreciation of differences, Harper believes that his beliefs are correct only, and insists others to follow his views at all costs. In this respect, Bhabha's theory of hybridity addresses the inequality of power relations. The authorities' position is challenged due to the flowing center-margin state in the colonial discourse (Young, 1995, p. 21). Harper does not recognize other people as important enough to call them by their names. For instance, the secretary's name and gender is unknown; he/she is only referred to as 'the secretary'. Similarly, Harper does not call the native painter by her name 'Afua'; he refers to her only as the 'Black woman'. "One of the most striking contradictions about colonialism is that it both needs to 'civilise' its 'others', and to fix them into perpetual 'otherness' " (Loomba, 2015, p. 171). The fact of not using people's name, coupled with his insistence on whitewashing the walls, indicate his attitude of self-aggrandizement meaning that he does not care about anything but his own desires; others should be there for him, not vice versa.

Indigenous peoples have always been victims of racism, and have been treated with derogatory language. Colonial thought targets the social identity of the natives by stereotyping. The colonizer propagates stereotypes like 'we are civilized and others are savage' to maintain the colonial dominance over the subordinate. Lundquist (2004) believes that "Whites often engage in bipolar thinking with regard to Native Americans. . . . Postmodern thinkers have clearly demonstrated, the first word in any binary is often the privileged one or, . . . reflects the purposes of the creators of those binaries: civilized/uncivilized". (p. 19). Afua, here in this story, questions Harper's viewpoint as she challenges Harper's insistence to whitewash the office walls. Afua asserts "'These are old walls,' . . . 'They have a history. Walls have a memory.' 'White,' said Harper. 'I asked for white.' 'I know,' said Afua,'but they don't want to cooperate.' " (King, 2013, p. 87). Afua's answer is very apropos and thought-provoking as she discredits this domineering, uncaring attitude. She narrates the voices silenced by colonial thought, and nudges Harper and people alike to face the fact, to embrace the good, and to give up the wrong. Afua is indeed considerate, Harper is per contra self-centered. Afua's answer helps us "understand how to uphold our responsibilities to one another and the rest of creation" (Justice, 2018, p. 2). In this story, Thomas King insinuates that "Harper tends to erase the difference of the natives, . . . In King's story, walls symbolize natives, or those coming from different origins, while Harper's insistence on the colour white reflects assimilationist attitudes of the White man" (Nicolaescu, 2015, p. 96).

The next day, Harper struggled to paint his office walls, but his efforts failed as he watched the white patch "slowly faded away. He painted the patch again. And again. And again." (King, 2013, p. 87). This is a self-explanatory example of the unsteady situation of both *dominant* and *subordinate* in the colonial discourse. Bhabha believes that "the object of colonial discourse is marked by ambivalence" (Childs & Williams, 1997, p. 124). For Bhabha there is "always *both* an aggressive expression of domination over the other *and* evidence of narcissistic anxiety about the self. The colonizer aggressively states his superiority to the colonized, but is always anxiously contemplating his own identity, which is never . . . stable" (Huddart, 2006, p. 29). As it is represented here,

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this process deconstructs the predetermined dominant-subordinate position to *dominant? - subordinate?* state in which nothing is certain but uncertainty itself. Chiriboga (2006) underscores that "cultural identity of a group is not static; . . . Its identity flows and has a dynamic process of reconstruction . . . produced by continual discussions on both an internal level and through the contact with—and the influence of—other cultures" (p. 45). The correlation between the two sides of the dichotomy leads to new qualities for both sides, and the existence of such an exchange questions the colonial mastery over the subaltern. This process unequivocally disproves the taken-for-granted position of the colonial power.

The colonizer sets up a *center-margin* dichotomy in which the dominant is evermore at the center while the subaltern remains voiceless at the margin. Kot (2017) mentions that "all indigenous peoples of America are likely to have historically related cultures and share common experiences of colonization, deprivation, discrimination, and dislocation" (p. 8). The colonizer devises this unequal situation to authenticate his ideas, to subjugate the colonized, and finally to help the colonial ethos stand unshaken. This binary system, as the name speaks for itself, publicizes the *center*'s favored thoughts and ideas. In *The Colour of Walls,* the redundant application of words such as 'black' and 'white' is a clear measure of how Harper thinks. His indissoluble bond with stereotyping is most notably expressed where he asks his unnamed secretary: " 'Get the black woman back,' . . . 'Actually,' said the secretary, 'she's Native.' 'Native?' said Harper. 'She looks black.' " (King, 2013, p. 87). Bearing that in mind, Nicolaescu (2015) reiterates that,

> Stereotyping is a conscious attempt to demonstrate the alleged superiority of a person over other races or ethnic groups. It has been a discursive tool for controlling peoples for the White man. 'All blacks are the same' or 'All natives are brown' are such statements that brings inequality into the surface of relationships. (p. 97)

Behind Afua's words there is a history of trauma. Although these untold numbers of losses cannot be undone, but she is incontrovertibly the narrator of a hope-filled avenue where equality is superior than inequality; and equality does not mean to be much the same, but to be yourself with faith and freedom, without fear. Alfred (1999) notes that Indigenous people have tried hard for "reconstructing their identities as autonomous individual, collective, and social beings. . . . the threat of cultural assimilation to the North American mainstream is no longer overwhelming, because substantial pride has been restored in the idea of being Native" (p. 2). In *The Colour of Walls*, Afua is indeed the consummate model of wisdom and faith looking for a better today, and a brighter tomorrow where equality is the quality that everyone shares, not only a few.

The colonial power produces, repeats, and propagates the discourses protecting colonial interests, thereby, the colonizer makes every effort to devalue the culture of the subordinate. That being said, the colonizer unilaterally defines the colonized. In this discriminatory system, there are movements, but there is no progress; ipso facto, the colonized can only move within the boundaries set by the colonizer. Taking that into consideration, In Harper's worldview, others' backgrounds construct their immutable identities, and everything retains its invariable place and order. A Native is Native; even colors possess their own places. "Black is a fine colour for limousines and evening dresses, while white is the colour of choice for wedding dresses and the walls of offices where important business is conducted" (King, 2013, p. 88). In the system of colonial domination, the *dominant* (re) arranges the network of connections where nothing is supposed to change its place. The colonizer creates stereotypes and manipulates them to the colonial advantage, and endorses these tendentious stereotypes insofar as they deify the colonial power. As soon as the stereotypes lose their influence, the ruling power replaces them with new ones; this is where 'hybridity' comes in to reveal this made-up structure. Hybridity exposes this structural inequality where the colonizing power put themselves on the privileged side of the binary while the subaltern remains on the underprivileged side ad infinitum. In this regard, Alfred (1999) emphasizes what we need is "the

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kind of education that would force the general population to engage with realities other than their own, increasing their capacity to empathize with others--to see other points of view and to understand other people's motivations and desires" (p. 132). A further example from the story would clarify the point, when Afua stands in the middle of the room, closes her eyes and says "The world is full of colour" (King, 2013, p. 88). At this moment, Afua's response reminds the reader that *white* is not the only color in the world. She represents the voice of indigenous peoples, and questions the colonial taken-for-granted thoughts. Hybridity underlines this discriminatory polarity where the dominant power publicizes their own beloved norms while the subaltern is supposed to be voiceless and passive.

Harper's worldview is one of the most important issues that needs to be addressed here. There is no marked change in his behavior from the beginning of the story to the end. In his worldview others are deemed as ignorant; therefore, everyone must interpret reality according to Harper's worldview. He lives in a bubble of illusions where he remains at the *center* forever while others are relegated to a peripheral status playing a minor role only. Alfred (1999) asserts that "one reason we have lost our way is that the materialistic mainstream value system has blinded us to the subtle beauty of indigenous systems founded on profound respect for balance. Without that respect, the system fails" (p. 44). Truth be told, it is true. As it is evident, Harper's worldview gradually separates him from the real world, and makes him disinclined to build constructive relationships with others. Harper, by all appearances, does not do any one the slightest good. Yet again, Harper is at the center while others can be never; this attitude would lay the groundwork for racial inequality in human society. Findlay (2000) states that,

> Indigenous peoples worldwide are still undergoing trauma and stress from genocide and the destruction of their lives by colonization. Their stories are often silenced as they are made to endure other atrocities. Many of these Indigenous peoples were unable to attend the institute to share their stories. (p. xxii)

Creating a dichotomy as '*center* is mine, *margin* is yours' is a discriminatory attempt where *center* is deemed as original while *margin* never is. Thus, others need the *center*, not vice versa. Harper cares nothing for others; in his worldview the "perception of the outsider as the one who needs help has taken on the successive forms of . . . the pagan, the infidel, the wild man, the "native," and the underdeveloped. . . . these forms . . . can only exist in relation to their opposites" (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 54). Binary oppositions such as disciplined/ignorant, educated/illiterate, center/ margin, civilized/savage, rationality/irrational, and so forth. Those who are put in the margins are "entrapped in a circular dance where they always find themselves a pace behind the white saviors" (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 59). Harper, by creating and propagating the I/Others duality, tries to justify his behavior. His relationship with others is like a circle, and the expansion of the circle serves his desires only. As it happens, his selfish behavior is of little merit to people around him.

Harper disregards the fact that those pushed to the margin have the right, ability, and potential to question the colonial rationale. Thomas King "uses metaphor of wall in his story. Wall symbolizes indigenous people who resist to the efforts of assimilation" (Nicolaescu, 2015, p. 93). Harper, living in the bubble of his own arrogance, is unable to have empathy for those who are pushed to the *margin*. Hall (2013) states

> Cultural identities . . . are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. . . . we can properly understand the traumatic character of 'the colonial experience'. The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation. (p. 394)

The connection between the two sides of the binary provides opportunity for the *margin* to disprove the *center*'s made-up superiority. "In the case of cultural identities, hybridity refers to the fact that cultures are not discrete phenomena; instead, they are always in contact with one another, and this contact leads to cultural mixed-ness" (Huddart, 2006, p. 4). Harper and people alike fail to acknowledge the importance of

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peaceful coexistence. In *The Colour of Walls*, when Harper realizes the walls are painted white, he "sat in his office all day, enjoying his new walls, but that evening, . . . he discovered that his hands had turned black" (King, 2013, p. 88). When he realized the white color has turned into black, he asks for Afua's help; she responds: " 'Not much I can do about that', . . . 'You're the one who wanted white walls'" (King, 2013, p. 89). The *margin* resists the *center*'s stifling colonial ethos. At the end of the story, Harper is unsatisfied because "Some days the walls would be too dark and his hands would look fine, and the next day the walls would look great and his hands would look, well, tawny" (King, 2013, p. 89). Since resistance is an integral part of the *subordinate*'s identity, dominance between the colonizer and the colonized lies in continuous flux. To put it another way, each side of the binary possesses the potential to give and take the qualities of the other side. This process of cultural struggle enables the *subordinate* to cast doubt on the alleged colonizer's racial superiority, and resist the colonial gaze.

CONCLUSION

With the application of Bhabha's critical concept of hybridity, the present article investigated the interplay between the *dominant* (*center*) and the *subordinate* (*margin*) in Thomas King's *The Colour of Walls* (2013). Taken together, the results reveal the unstable nature of *dominant-subordinate* correlation because this network of power-based relationships is constantly reshaping; therefore, it should not be deemed as a static process. This process of cultural struggle has the capability to marginalize the *center* and to centralize the *margin*; and on top of that, it provides opportunity for the *subordinate* to reclaim their own identity. By examining Harper's worldview and behavior, the results indicate the negative impacts of arrogance and egotism on human relationships, and even beyond that, reveal the *subaltern*'s power to resist the colonizer's assimilationist attempts. *The Colour of Walls* is edifying since it narrates the story of hope vs cynicism, respect vs egotism, and justice vs prejudice. Accordingly, the present study concludes with a reminder that accepting differences is the beginning of solidarity in human society. This article sends the message of inclusivity and serves as an invitation to celebrate diversity and reject discrimination. It is, furthermore, a reminder to welcome the culture of equality and reject inequality in society. With those reservations in mind, it is self-evident that the prosperity of humankind is based on ideas that promote love and peace within humans and beyond borders, as Mahatma Gandhi says, "The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace" (Brewer, 2019, p. 63).

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