

## **BINARY OPPOSITIONS: A TOOL TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING AND TOLERANCE TOWARDS THE MARGINALIZED<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Triggered by the recent armed conflicts in different Indonesian societies and inspired by teacher's strategic position to utilize education for peace, this study was conducted to help students indirectly contribute for a less conflicting environment. Since conflict is a result of disagreements in needs or necessities, which implies privileged and less-privileged groups, structuralism, particularly binary oppositions, was utilized. Implied in most first things one learns, binary oppositions are often taken for granted as how things are and should be; and thus, are ideological. In a norm-oriented society such as Indonesia, such a mindset may lead to unfairly labeling or judging the different others. Therefore, the 32 Prose students participating in this study were asked to utilize what they had learned in class to scrutinize the prevailing binary oppositions and labels and to present their findings in a collage group seminar, in which they also received comments and answered questions from the audience. The presentation was followed by the participants' individual written report of their analysis of the labels and their underlying ideologies. The essays revealed most students' critical questioning of the unfair judgments found in their society and the reasons behind them; thus, a stepping stone to better understand and tolerate the marginalized.

**Keywords:** Binary oppositions, marginalized, privileged, underlying ideology

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an enhanced version of the one presented at the 58<sup>th</sup> Teflin International Conference held at IKIP PGRI Semarang on November 3-5, 2011.

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## INTRODUCTION

He recent physical and armed conflicts as well as suicide bombings taking place in different Indonesian societies due to interreligious, inter-ethnic, or social class disagreements, are ones that trigger deep concern. They not only leave long-lasting pain, but also threaten the unity of heterogeneous Indonesia. In this global world, where, like it or not, societies are getting more and more plural, such disputes should have been eliminated to foster multiculturalism. The task of minimizing and managing conflicts is everyone's responsibility. As an English teacher and educator, I do not only share the same responsibility, but also the need to relate English lessons to real life to make them down to earth and meaningful. As Gee argues, English teachers have to decide to isolate teaching from the socio-political issues or to accept that they "stand at the very heart of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time" (qtd. in Birch 4). Inspired by Birch (3) that a teacher has "strategic positions and power to educate for peace and sustainable world", I decided to look into the possible roots of the conflicts to find out how the teaching of English can indirectly help ease the pain and transform the present painful situation into a more peaceful one.

Conflicts happen because of differences in need, desire, values, or resources (Birch 140), which imply a belief that mine is proper, good, or right but yours is improper, bad, or wrong. They may also be triggered by inequalities and injustice, which exist because one group is more privileged than the other(s). Since a completely uniformed or totally equal and just society is a utopia, conflicts are inevitable. According to Birch (141), the problem with conflict does not lie in the word's denotative meaning but its connotations; i.e. anger, fear, disrupted relationship, disharmony, threat, suspicion, violence, even genocide. Suspicion creates worry, anger results in fear or violence. Since conflict involves at least two different parties, to minimize conflict's connotative associations means to understand the different other(s).

To utilize English teaching to enable learners be agents of peace, I borrow Rockwell's belief that fiction is an inseparable element of social investigation, social control, and social change (3-4). Employing literature to promote tolerance and understanding, thirty-two students of Prose class took part in the data collection conducted from May 16, 2011 to June 3, 2011. In the seven meetings held during the research period, three short stories; namely "A Jury of Her Peers" by Susan Glaspell, "The Chessmen" by Toshio Mori, and "A Madman's Diary" by Lu Hsun were discussed from structuralism perspective, particularly by examining the binary oppositions explicitly or implicitly portrayed in the works to grasp the meaning of the

texts and the ideologies underlying the binary oppositions. To transfer what the learners have learned into their real life, reader-response criticism is employed. Since binary oppositions imply a less valued idea, the learners were then asked to examine less privileged groups in their society, what binary oppositions or labels were given to such groups, and the reasons or ideologies underlying the labels.

To allow students practice to understand other people, they should work in groups of three. Due to the class size, there were eight groups of three and two groups of four. In groups, the participants examined the binary oppositions, particularly the less privileged ideas given to the marginalized groups in their society. They then expressed their findings in a soft copy of collage of pictures, and presented them in a group seminar. The seminar was divided into two sessions, with five groups presenting in each. While half of the class were doing their presentation, the other half and the teacher acted as the audience. They divided themselves into small groups who moved from one table to another to enjoy the collages, listen to the groups' presentation and took part in a question-answer session. At the same time, the audience, including the teacher, individually filled out an assessment form of the collage and the presentation. Since the audience attended the seminar as small groups, the presenters practically had to repeat their presentation a few times and might receive different questions. The questions and comments would enrich their individual essay. The assessment forms were submitted to the teacher, and the grades were used to grade the groups' collage and presentation.

## Binary Oppositions

Structuralism believes that literature is a fundamental means by which human beings explain the world to themselves (Tyson 219). It also agrees that the structure of human consciousness is projected in the perceived structure of literary works, which leads to the structure underlying human experiences (220). Such structure is implied in *langue*, which shows how text works (Saussure qtd. in Bertens, 56) since *langue* enables basic literary elements to be identified and combined (Tyson 220). By scrutinizing *langue*, structuralists attempt to dig out a universal thought that relate innate structures of human consciousness to their experience, attitude, and production. In other words, a detailed examination of the "inner workings of literary texts" will lead to the fundamental structural units or functions governing how a text's narrative operates (254). As Bressler points out, a text does not stand by itself, but is "part of the shared system of meaning

that is intertextual ... all texts refer readers to other texts”, and meaning is “determined by the system that governs the writer” (95).

Greimas explains these structural units as binary oppositions. To him, binary oppositions shape human language, experience, and narratives depicting the experience (qtd. in Tyson 225). Selden (68-69) confirms that “the operations and oppositions which govern language” are the source of meaning, which is shaped by the system governing the individual. Therefore, the writer or readers’ experience does not contribute to meaning.

Greimas believes that the fundamental structure of binary oppositions come in two pairs; i.e. opposite or contrast and negation or absence (qtd. in Tyson 224-225). These contrasting pairs of words denoting inequalities and dissimilarities immediately connect the discussion to real life. As Levi-Strauss proposes, “binary oppositions... constitute the basis of what we call culture” (qtd. in Bertens 63). The basic understanding of reality inherent in binary oppositions are translated into cultural acts. Strauss explains that binary oppositions are expressed in, among others, rites, taboos, customs, and manner. In other words, binary oppositions are shared and arbitrary. They remain over time so that they are unrecognizable and; thus, taken for granted.

Barker (60) considers things taken for granted as the most important “arena” of ideological struggle. Taking the form of common sense, ideology is a part of daily activities, governing individual’s practical and moral attitude (59). It is present in the process of production of meaning, signs, and values in social life (Eagleton, 1). For example, in the cultural contrasting pair of left/right, left is less privileged than right because left is associated with negative meaning; whereas right has a positive connotation. This shared meaning governs individuals to behave in “socially acceptable ways” (Althusser qtd. in Fiske 117).

Therefore, by examining the binary oppositions in the aforementioned three literary works and scrutinizing which word in each contrasting pair is less or more privileged, the learners would understand the ideology underlying the binary oppositions. Such an awareness was expected to help them tolerate the less privileged or the marginalized to enable them create a more peaceful environment.

### **“A Jury of Her Peers”, “Chessmen”, and “A Madman’s Diary”**

“A Jury of Her Peers” depicts Minnie, a wife who was arrested because her husband, John Wright, was found dead at home. While the sheriff and district attorney were searching her house for evidence, their wives talked about Minnie in the kitchen. While observing the kitchen things, these two ladies accidentally found the evidences leading to who had

murdered John and how he was killed. But the proofs as well as the kitchen things indicated how Minnie must have felt oppressed during her marriage so that they decided to hide the evidences and help Minnie. They successfully did it since their husbands did not rummaged the kitchen, reasoning that it was only a place of trivial ladies things.

The discussion on “A Jury of Her Peers” was based on the sample essay provided in Bressler (101-104). It discusses three pairs of binary oppositions; namely how “Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale interact with each other as opposed to how they do so with their husbands ... the concept of freedom versus oppression, ...and what each gender deems noteworthy...” (Bressler 101). Since the three binary oppositions contrast the female characters to the male, and the second pairs refer to the freedom the male character enjoyed and the oppression the female characters, particularly Minnie Wright, suffered in their marriage, the binary oppositions lead to patriarchy, which Hartman explains as a solidarity among men that enables them to oppress women and which is maintained through, among others, marriage (15).

### **“The Chessmen”**

The story started with George Murai’s arrival at Hatayama Nursery to work. As an inexperienced, young worker, George learned a lot from Nakagawa, the old and highly experienced carnation grower who had worked together with Hatayama, the owner, for seven years. Patiently Nakagawa shared his knowledge with George. However, their friendship turns to be a silent competition after Hatayama-san, the owner, expressed his intention of firing George Murai when the heavy work of loading carnation boxes onto the trucks had been done. He could not afford to pay two workers since flower business had been bad. In an attempt to impress his boss and to keep his position, George loaded the carnation boxes onto the truck with the pace of a young man so that Nakagawa could not keep up with him, and was even sick. Nakagawa sensed the rivalry George started, but he could not do anything due to his physical limitations. After the heavy work had been finished, Nakagawa was fired.

The discussion of the binary oppositions in the story was based on contrasting George and Nakagawa, the young versus the old workers in the nursery. Contrasted to George who was physically strong, healthy and quick, Nakagawa was physically weak, sickly and slow. Despite his being inexperienced, George was eager to learn; while Nakagawa was willing to share his knowledge. The story depicts how the adjectives related to being young are more privileged as represented by Hatayama’s decision to then

fire Nakagawa instead of George despite Nakagawa's long term of service and their close relationship. These binary oppositions refer to the ideology of capitalism which perceive things and base all decisions on how much companies can make a profit. The capitalist is represented by Hatayama who, impressed by how quicker and stronger George was compared to Nakagawa, changed his mind and fired Nakagawa.

### **“A Madman's Diary”**

The story is actually a diary of a man who was once considered to be mad by his family and society. The madman, upon his recovery, left his hometown to “take up an official post” (Lu Hsun, I). The madman had been considered to be mentally ill since he stepped on account sheet of feudal oppression in ancient China. He then expressed his fear that his neighbors, even his brother, would eat or kill him.

The discussion of the binary oppositions referred to mad versus sane. The story portrays that mad is associated with attitudes or ideas which are different from the ones held by the society. For example, the madman did not appreciate the longtime feudal oppression in China, but the society respected it. Stepping on it is certainly a disrespectful attitude. The madman read the essence of Confucian teaching; i.e. virtue and morality, as “eat people”. Being asked if the madman was really mad, the class agreed that he was not. He was only critical toward what happened in the society—that is ordinary people killed each other (eat people) for their leaders.

The binary oppositions led to Marxism in which the dominant used the subordinates for their own interest. The leaders in the story manipulated and sacrificed their people so that they were able to keep their power and position. The madman was labeled mad due to his critical perception of what was practiced. The label is a form of hegemony used by the powerful groups to maintain their dominance.

### **Less Privileged Groups in Students' Perception**

There were ten collages, picturing five different less privileged groups in the society. Three or thirty percent observed women as the marginalized, two or twenty percent questioned why punks were perceived negatively, another twenty percent discussed group or racial stereotypes, still another two collages or twenty percent examined government officials as the marginalized, and one collage or ten percent considered those having tattoo(s) as the periphery group.

One group examined why women have been considered the weaker sex, both at home and in public domain. At home, women are associated with household chores and child- raising. In public, particularly in more

traditional societies, women are considered weak that they have to be protected. The group found four reasons for such a perception. First, women look physically weaker than men. Second, women are considered to be less logical or rational because they commonly cry more easily than men do. That women behave more calmly is considered the third reason, although the group identified the society's expectation as a force behind women's attitude. If a woman does not behave calmly and speak softly, she will be labeled a bad woman. The last reason lies in the society's assumption that women can only do easy jobs, such as being a housekeeper or secretary.

The group argued that perceiving women as the weaker sex was totally wrong because women managed to do what men could, including being a truck driver. They also emphasized that 'behind a successful man there is a great woman', which indicates women as strong figures. Being asked why women generally cried more frequently and why they were more feminine, the group concluded that the reason is rooted in the way children are raised. A little girl is given dolls and cooking utensils as her toys; whereas a boy is given cars, aeroplanes, and toy swords or rifles to play with. Besides, the group managed to see that little girls are usually allowed to cry, but boys are not.

Another group questioned why it is indecent and improper for women to smoke; while it is more tolerable for men to do it. The group observed cigarette is a symbol of masculinity; while women are expected to be feminine and a role model for their children. Being a role model, the society also expects women not to act against the societal norms. The students disagreed that smoking women are bad because these women may turn to smoking as an escape from unsolved problems. Therefore, the group concluded that to judge smoking women is totally wrong.

Women who wear socially-considered-sexy outfits is a less-privileged group.. The learners argued that girls in tank tops or minis are often labeled 'naughty', 'inviting', 'sirens', even 'prostitutes' so that parents would not encourage their sons to date such girls. With the increasing number of girls wearing Islamic outfit, these two groups of girls are often contrasted, resulting in the negative image labeled to the ones wearing the so-called sexy clothes. The presenting students stated when sales promotion girls wear minis in their work area, it is not a problem. But once they leave their 'comfort zone', labeling begins. The learners concluded that girls are often judged because of their appearance instead of attitude and personality. This is unfair considering in doing their jobs, some girls and women are 'forced' to wear tight and mini skirts.

The presenting group and another group questioned the negative judgment given to those with tattoos. According to them, the labeling is

partly influenced by history and the portrayal of criminals in movies. In the past, criminals were given seal to show they were criminals. In movies, criminals are often depicted as those tattoos. Consequently, a particular image about people with tattoos is established. Of the two groups examining the labels given to those with tattoos, one managed to observe that the Indonesian society tend to weigh anything based on what is seen, which should meet prevailing social norms and standard. The presenting group believed that Puritanism is the cultural mindset underlying the social assumption that people with tattoos are either badly behaved or rule violators.

Two groups of students examined the negative label given to government officials, i.e. House members and traffic policemen. Both officials are considered to have manipulated their positions to corrupt, blackmail, and grab opportunities for their own interests. Contrasting these state apparatuses to the public, the groups came up with two pairs of binary oppositions; i.e. powerful/powerless and prosperous/sacrificed. Relating them to the story, the presenting groups criticized that instead of working for the people's interests, House members and traffic policemen often 'eat people'<sup>2</sup>. Instead of defending and working for the people's welfare, they sacrifice the people for their own benefits. The students related this corrupt attitude to feudalism because it is an ideology "which benefits only people of high status, while the low-status people are oppressed. In the context of Indonesian House of Representative members, they use their high position to do illegal things to benefit them by sacrificing the people's rights."<sup>3</sup>. Despite the careful and critical examination the student had, unfortunately she failed to explain how feudalism created corrupt culture<sup>4</sup>.

Another prevailing label in the society that the students examined is the label given to some Moslems due to several recent bombings carried out by a particular small group(s) of Moslems. Since the attack to the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, Moslems have sometimes been labeled terrorists. The presenting group argued that such label is totally wrong, considering the contrasting attitudes Moslems and terrorists have. They argued that terrorists act against the law; whereas Moslems obey the law. Instead of respecting other people as Moslems do, terrorists do not care about others outside their circle. They are also irrational because they have

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<sup>2</sup> 'Eat people' is an expression frequently mentioned by the madman in Lu Hsun's "A Madman's Diary". The madman interpreted Virtue and Morality in Confucian teachings as 'Eat people'. Lu Hsun criticizes that the Confucian teachings are not reflected in Chinese history, particularly in the feudal ancient China, which was full of armed conflicts.

<sup>3</sup> This quotation is cited from one of the students' essays.

<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Jeremy Mulholland, Pramodya Ananta Toer revealed that the elite corruption in Indonesia originates from aristocratism and feudalism. The habit of giving gifts to the aristocrats is the root of bribery and corruption.



been brainwashed; whereas Moslems do not do anything irrational. They act based on Islamic norms and teachings. In contrast, terrorists act to achieve their group's objectives. Another student in the group contrasted the how the groups spread their 'teachings'. Moslems spread Islamic teachings openly; while terrorists do it in secretly that even members of the group do not know each other.

The group considers the wrong interpretation of Jihad<sup>5</sup> in Islam as the cause of terrorism. According one member of the presenting group, terrorists understand the concept of Jihad in Islam literally so that they fight in extreme ways by exploding bombs or hijacking planes. On the other hand, Moslems interpret jihad as fighting against bad deeds through dialogs and discussion to prevent others from doing what Islam prohibits. Islam considers killing a big sin and only God has the right to take one's life.

The punkers are one marginalized group exposed by two groups of students in the group seminar. They argued that the punkers have always been perceived negatively<sup>6</sup>. People think punkers are jobless, homeless, uneducated, rule breakers, impolite lazy youth, because of the group's appearance: pierced ears, tattoos, shattered clothes, Mohawk style hair. Some even associate punkers with drugs, alcoholic drinks and crime. The groups argued that not all the labels given to punkers are true. Punkers actually would like to be independent both personally and socially. They related the punkers to the history of punk movement, which originated in the England, as the working class movement to cross the border between social classes. I may add that the punk movement was originally a protest against the mainstream socio-culture, and the Indonesian punkers would like to adopt the first punkers' independence.

Another group presenting punk stated that some punkers in Salatiga are really homeless and do smoke and drink alcoholic drinks when they hang out. Their using strikingly attracting make-up to catch people's attention has made the public perceived them negatively. However, the group also mentioned that some punkers did care for what happened to the powerless. They cited a punk band concert which was held to help 5,000,000 displaced people in Columbia, and the charity they organized to help the displaced. In other words, this group presented the good and bad sides of punkers.

The social prejudice towards punkers may originate in the cultural characteristic of the Indonesian society as a collectivist. Despite some

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<sup>5</sup> Jihad in Islam is Moslem's belief to fight the bad things done by people (quoted from a student's essay)

<sup>6</sup> The term 'always' is used since one student of the two groups examining punkers is a member of a punk herself. She wrote in her essay that her acknowledgment that she was a punk shocked the audience of the seminar.

cultural changes the society has undergone, its valuing a harmonious social appearance has not been completely diminished. Kameo maintains that in a collectivist culture, individuals are taught to base their personal identity on the group's identity (4). In result, the punkers whose identity is strikingly different from the mainstream identity is suspiciously perceived as those who disturb the social harmony.

The last privileged group presented in the seminar is the poor Indonesian, who have been marginalized in law. Inspired by some recent cases of unequal law enforcement reported in the media, particularly the case of Arthalyta Suryani, a corruptor who enjoyed a lot of privileges in jail, the group concluded that money is a powerful authority in law. They supported their argument by contrasting that rich corruptors are given lighter sentences. In contrast, the law is strictly upheld for the poor. Such law enforcement does not fit the characteristics of *Goddess La Justicia*; i.e. shut eyes, sword, and scales, which symbolize that law must be totally upheld.

## CONCLUSION

With the help of structuralism, particularly binary oppositions, the thirty-two Prose students managed to transfer what they have learned in class to identify the less privileged groups in the Indonesian society, scrutinize the labels or binary oppositions attached to them as well the underlying ideologies. Women are the ostly discussed less-privileged group. The students' examination reveals that the cultural upbringing shape girls to be emotionally more sensitive compared to men. Besides, patriarchy put women under scrutiny that the way they dress and act are very much interfered, resulting in the different standards of norms applied to men and women. Besides being patriarchal, the Indonesian society tend to put much emphasis on appearance as reflected not only in their judging women wearing 'socially-considered-sexy' dress, but also the punkers or people having tattoos. Apart from Puritanism as suggested by some students, such an attitude may be affected by the characteristic of Indonesian society as a collectivist culture, which emphasizes on harmonious social appearance and group instead of individual identity.

The other marginalized groups scrutinized are state apparatuses such as House members and traffic policemen, the poor, and some Moslems who are labeled terrorists. The corrupt state apparatuses are said to be rooted in feudalism; while the unjust treatment the poor suffer is partly due to the rampant feudalistic attitude as the source of the corrupt culture. Unequipped with money, the poor cannot buy the law so that it is strictly upheld upon them. Regarding the stigma attached to some Moslems, the students examining this less privileged group conclude that the labeling originates

from the wrong interpretation of the concept of Jihad in Islam. Because of that, they contrast terrorists and Moslems or Islamic teachings to support the notion that Moslems are not terrorists.

Such examinations bring an awareness of the less privileged groups in the society, the labels addressed to them, and the reasons or ideologies underlying the labeling. The awareness is supposed to enable the learners who are prospective English teachers to better understand the so-called different others; thus to help create a more peaceful society. As teachers later, they will also be able to empathize with the marginalized student(s) in class and assist the others to put themselves in the less privileged student(s) 's shoes to create a more harmonious atmosphere and to educate the others to be more tolerant towards those different from them.

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