

**Review Article****AN EXPRESSION OF COLOR PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS:
DECONSTRUCTING THE BINARISM OF WHITE COLOR IN HAN KANG'S THE WHITE
BOOK**

Sruthi P *, Dr. Sangeeta Mukherjee**

Research Scholar ,Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages,Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India - 632014. Email: psruthipalliayalil@gmail.comAssistant Professor (Senior), Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India - 632014. Email Id: sangeetamukherjee70@gmail.com

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Abstract

From time immemorial, human beings have tried to uncover the meaning of their existence. Philosophers and scientists alike have tried to answer the puzzling questions on human consciousness. Consciousness can be considered as the most familiar yet the most mysterious aspect of human lives. Human consciousness is often the outcome of what we see and what we perceive. The colors that we see around us can have a great impact on our moods and feelings. Color Psychology studies how hues determine human behavior, moods and feelings. In literary texts, especially in the autobiographical ones, authors have tried to express their self, identity, consciousness and their mental and physical beings through symbols and binarisms. The dichotomies in the society in which one lives affect the existence of the individual. Binary opposites are considered as 'western construct'. French anthropologist Levi Strauss, who is considered as the father of modern anthropology, proposed the theory of binary opposites and spoke about how books and media use binary opposites to strengthen their plot, develop narratives and bring about contrasts. Han Kang in her semi-autobiographical novel, *The White Book*, has extensively used the color 'white' to express her moods, feelings, memories and thoughts. White is a color that comprises of all the other colors in the color spectrum. The white color is usually associated with peace, purity and hope. On the contrary, it also symbolizes death, detachment, disinterest and dryness. This dichotomy is used very beautifully throughout the novel. The current paper thus tries to deconstruct the binarisms of the color white as used in the novel, *The White Book*. The paper also tries to examine how color psychology affects human behavior and consciousness.

Keywords: Human consciousness, Color Psychology, White, Binary opposites, Deconstruction, Dichotomy, Symbols.

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'consciousness' refers to the "state of being aware of what passes in one's own mind" (Harper, 2006). It can be considered as a person's awareness or perception of something. It is the awareness or responsiveness to one's surroundings. This doesn't imply that only human beings have consciousness. Animals too have their own presence of mind. 'Consciousness is present in many animal species but there is no other species that plays, communicates and uses tools as much as humans do' (Kotchoubey, 2018). Nixon (2010) too comes up with a similar opinion, in the closed definition, 'conscious experience is unique to humans, but that by no means implies that other animals are automatons' (p. 295). But no other animals use consciousness in the way humans use. Humans use language to think and express their thoughts. Language can thus be considered as a way to express one's consciousness. Hence 'human consciousness' is animal consciousness multiplied by language (Edelman, 1989).

Consciousness can be considered as the psychology of awareness. Color psychology is a study that explores how colors affect human psychology. Every human perceptual system contains color information and the influence of color affects psychological functioning too. Different colors can impact one's mood, feelings and behavior. For instance, red and yellow are naturally experienced as stimulating and disagreeable, these colors focus people on the outward environment, and they produce forceful, expansive behavior; whereas green and blue are experienced as quieting and agreeable, focus people inward, and produce reserved, stable behavior (Goldstein, 1942). Red recalls to mind a feeling of danger, a warning ... green immediately recalls the garb of

nature, the outdoors, freedom ...blue is suggestive of truth, calm, serenity, hope (Kalmus, 1935, p. 143) while 'white things are viewed as pure and stereotyping' (Elliot, p.2, 2015). Likewise, different colors have different psychological effects on human beings and the writers of various languages and regions have deftly used the psychology of color in their works.

The current paper focuses on how the binarisms of white are interpreted in the novel, *The White Book* (WB), written by the South Korean novelist Han Kang and translated into English by Deborah Smith. The novel is deconstructed on the basis of color psychology that affects the consciousness of the narrator.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Andrew J. Elliot and Markus A. Maier (2007) in their paper, 'Color and Psychological Functioning,' argue that some colors have pan-cultural meanings, while others have different meanings that vary from culture to culture. Color is a ubiquitous perceptual experience of the perceived social environment on important affective, cognitive, and behavioral processes outside of conscious awareness (p. 253). In the paper, 'A Psycho-Linguistic Exploration of Color Semantics', Niazi, et al. (2015) opine that different colors have different types of symbolism and can have various connotations (p. 5). Biologists across the world have studied the psychology of color perception and preferences among different species by analyzing their behavior (Crozier, 1999). Studies on the difference in the color perception among men and women have been carried out and these investigations have indicated that there could be differences between

genders as far as preferences for colors are concerned (Iheme, et al. 2018).

A word cannot exist by itself without its binary opposite. In fact, it can be said that a word gets its meaning due to its binary opposite. Binary systems are the semantic oppositions and that they are encased in a cultural frame and are combined and organized to generate meaning (Abbasi and Hussein, 2012, p. 65). This is true in the case of colors too. The color 'white' gets a meaning due to its binary opposite 'black' and vice versa. The essence of binary opposition is revealed though opposition with another thing that has no quality at all and this remains the most important application of binary opposition in structural and post-structural criticism (Ahmadi, et al. 2013, p. 724).

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of the study includes qualitative and explorative study. Qualitative research is a form of social action that is used to interpret the data and understand the social reality of individuals through interviews, diaries, journals, classroom observations, immersions, and open-ended questionnaires to obtain and analyze visual and textual materials (Zohrabi, 2013). It is exploratory, and seeks to explain 'how' and 'why' a particular social phenomenon or program operates as it does in a particular context. It helps us to comprehend the social world in which we live, its structure and working (Polkinghorne, 2005). The techniques of analysis, synthesis and interpretivism are used in this paper as methods to deconstruct the binary opposites that are present in the novel, *The White Book*. Materials related to color psychology and binary opposition of different theorists like Saussure, Levi Strauss and Derrida have been considered and analyzed to frame the paper.

Color Psychology

The 'color' can be perceived as a powerful medium through which human beings view and understand the world around them. Most of the animals see only in shades of gray while humans are exposed to the 'marvelous additional dimension of vision'. Color influences human perception, preference and psychology (Bleicher, 2005). Crozier (1999) in his paper, 'The Meanings of Colour: Preferences among Hues,' observes that color preferences vary with age. He found that infants as young as three months stared mostly at red color, followed by yellow, blue, and green. The five-year-olds also preferred red, but they had different outlook towards preferences for other colors. For instance, after red, they stared the longest at blue, purple, orange, yellow, and green. A shift in color preference occurs again as the individual matures and reaches adulthood. Most significantly, adults begin to prefer green and blue, while starting to dislike yellow.

Valdez and Mehrabian (1994) in their paper, 'Effects of Color on Emotions' find that women are more sensitive towards variations in the saturation and value of color. Women tend to understand different shades of colors more than men. Women and men differ in their perceptions of gray scale tones and color combinations. For instance, women become more confused and distracted than their male counterparts at distinguishing the right shades of a color (Singh, 2006). The preference for color is not just confined to gender or age of an individual alone. Preferences can shift from culture to culture also. 'Cultural color conditioning' plays a significant role in shaping responses to color stimuli. Different cultures use colors differently and this cultural variation affects individual responses too. For example, the inhabitants of Ndembo in Zambia do not recognize orange as a color, whereas the Hindus consider it to be sacred (Singh, 2006). Birren (2007) in his work, *Principles of Colour* opines that human beings use color to express themselves; to communicate their thoughts and feelings. Rather than saying that colors have a direct influence on emotions, he concludes that the human perception of colors affect their emotions.

Binary Opposition

One of the most influential and skeptical theories in deconstructive literary criticism is of Derrida (Abrams and Geoffrey, 2012, p. 79). The first step in deconstructing a text is to understand the binary oppositions and break up the metaphysical logic (Hoteit, 2015). In binary opposition, the essence of everything is revealed through opposition with another thing that has no quality at all. The binary opposite gets meaning only due to the presence of the other word in the pair. This kind of distinction is interpreted as opposition. Our knowledge about things depends on our knowledge about what is in opposition with them (Caddon, 1999).

In the binary oppositions like speech/writing, nature/culture, truth/terror, male/female, etc., Derrida shows that 'the oppositions constitute a tacit hierarchy, in which the first term functions as privileged and superior and the second term as derivative and inferior' (Abrams and Geoffrey, 2012, p. 79). Levi Strauss investigates binary opposites by drawing examples from the most necessary things in everyday experiences such as raw/cooked, fresh/rotten, rare/well done, among others (Makaryk, 1993). Strauss believed that, behind all cultural activities, we can find a deep structure in binary oppositions which reflects the general structure of the human mind. Binary opposition can be considered as a solution to the oppositions in order to achieve the planned integrity (Azad Barmaki, 2003). The idea of binary opposition comes from Saussure's theory on 'structuralism'. According to Saussure, 'binary opposition is the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term, as in binary code. It is not a contradictory relation but, a structural, complementary one' (Fogarty, 2005).

ANALYSIS

The *White Book* (2018) by Han Kang is a novel written in fragments. The novel is an autobiographical one as it is a meditation on the death of the unnamed narrator's baby sister, who died two hours after her birth (Levy, 2017). The grief of the bereaved narrator is expressed in things that are 'white,' and the word 'white' has various connotations. This paper focuses on the dominant semantic structures being found throughout the novel. The word 'white' is the main focus of thread of the paper as it is used in binary oppositions throughout. The analysis of the primary concept of the word 'white' is followed by the analysis of numerous secondary pairs.

The novel is written in short sections and most of these sections are confined to just a paragraph. The chapters are written with headings that list white things. The author intentionally makes use of the white spaces in each of the chapters to show the blankness or void in her life. The book attempts to confront that sense of blankness, with its own white spaces. This is a work that is much about what is unsaid and omitted (Gleeson, 2017).

Deconstructing the Binarisms of 'White' in the Novel, *The White Book*

The nameless narrator initiates her story by listing out white things: Swaddling bands, Newborn gown, Salt, Snow, Ice, Moon, Rice ... White hair, Shroud (WB, p. 5) and the author hopes that these elements would transform her aching heart like a white ointment applied to a swelling, like gauze laid over a wound (WB, p. 6). Even though these things, which are white in color are usually associated with good things like purity, calmness, peace, etc., the author intends the exact opposite while listing these items. She feels that a ripple of agitation ran through her (WB, p. 5). In the subsequent chapters, she elaborates the binary oppositions of 'white' and plays with the color psychology. She uses binary opposition as a basic concept which influences the human way of thinking (Selden, 2005). She subverts the meanings usually associated with white and means the exact opposite when associating it with worldly things. She writes 'now I will give you white

things, what is white, though may yet be sullied; only white things will I give' (WB, p. 40).

In the chapter, 'Door,' the author recollects that the door was once white but its brightness has faded over time (WB, p. 9). In Swaddling Bands, she uses white to represent snow and talks about how her mother turned pale from blood loss during the delivery of the child and associates the silence of the winter season with the delivery and loss of the baby (WB, p.15). Throughout the course of the novel, the color white is seen associated with sadness, death, detachment, and hopelessness. The dichotomy of white is expressed further in the chapter, Newborn Gown, where the author narrates about her newborn sister. The baby is wrapped in a white gown representing purity of the child, but the joy is soon turned into sadness as her sister dies just two hours after her birth. The chapter, Moon-shaped Rice Cake, narrates another death story; the death of the narrator's dog, who died when she was five years old (WB, p.20). Here she associates a delicious food item to a sad incident like death which creates a dichotomy.

In the novel, white is not just a color, it is an expression of the present and past feelings of the author. The narrator asks, "Can we call it 'white?'" not knowing how to exactly represent her feelings (WB, p. 22). Her body feels like a prison (WB, p. 21). In 'White city,' the narrator travels through a cityscape that bears visible traces of World War II. She describes the buildings as a faithful construction which has been destroyed (WB, p. 26). Construction/destruction, a binary opposite, is used beautifully to express the recreation of a lost beauty. Another representation of white is in the chapter 'Breast Milk.' Breast milk is a symbol of grief as it cannot be used anymore to nourish anyone as the baby is no more (WB, p. 35). 'Snowflakes' represents loneliness, an aftermath of war and loss. She curses her loneliness; 'what the hell is this damned dirty white' (WB, p. 55).

As the novel progresses, one can see that the author slowly moves closer towards a doomed consciousness. She feels that the earth will one day vanish and nothing is eternal (WB, p. 59). Her mother's death is expressed in the chapter, 'Ashes.' She associates death to the color white by writing about her mother's powdered bones that she has kept safe in a box. The narrator continues her writings on death in the chapter, 'Yulan' by recollecting the demise of her classmates who died in a bus crash. She wonders what white flowers have to do with life? Or with death? (WB, p. 89). The White hair is used as a symbol of separation, something that will part forever from the body. The author's philosophy about life is simple yet complicated. She writes, 'Learning to love life is a long and complicated process. Because at some point you will inevitably cast me aside' (WB, p. 119).

Derrida's view of social structure that is based on binary pairs, in which one part of the pair is always given a higher cultural value than the other; one term is marked as positive and the other as negative (Klages, 2006) is absolutely true for the novel. The author plays skillfully with the dichotomies of the color white and gives us varied meanings of white that are not normally associated with it. Other than the dichotomies of white, one can see many other examples of binary oppositions in the novel like, bright/faded (WB, p. 9), white/black (WB, p. 20), white/dark (WB, p. 22), construct/destroy (WB, p. 26) younger/older (WB, p. 33), light/dark (WB, p. 137), etc. Levi Strauss' (1967) binary theory asserts that a binary pair, having both positive and negative qualities, can be considered as a solution for the opposition created by the binary. For instance, in the binary pair, white/black, black is taken as a negative entity and white heals the problems of black. For Saussure, binary opposites are inseparable in their opposition (Klages, 2018, p. 62). Since the novel is autobiographical in nature, it talks about the dichotomies in the author's life. Life is a mixture of negatives and positives. One cannot hope for a life full of happiness. Life is bitter-sweet and a perfect blend of happiness and sadness makes life worth living.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The study clearly indicates that color affects human psychology, thoughts and feelings. Different colors symbolize different meanings and these meanings that get associated with colors are as a result of social construction. Meanings that the colors represent vary from society to society. Like any other color, white too, represents human consciousness in its own manner. But the peculiarity of white is that it comprises of dichotomies. White is usually associated with positive aspects like peace, purity and innocence. But it also expresses negative characteristics like sadness, death, detachment, and loneliness. Han Kang has skillfully used the dichotomies of the color white in her novel, *The White Book*. The word 'white' creates a series of oppositions in the text. The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, considers binary opposition as a pair of words which acts like opposite poles in a magnet. Even though the words represent opposite meanings, they are indispensable to the other (Makaryk, 1993). In *The White Book*, the color white is used in a non-traditional sense. The narrator speaks about the darker side of her life using white things. The author connotes a negative meaning to things that are white. For her, white is the 'new black.'

ABBREVIATION USED

WB - The White Book

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