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**White Skin but Black Fate:
A Post-Colonial Reading of Joe Christmas' Identity
in *Light in August***

白皮肤却是黑人命运:

后殖民主义解读

《八月之光》中乔·克瑞斯默斯的身份问题

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Abstract

William Faulkner, a Southern American, was one of 20th century's most influential and highly regarded novelists. This thesis mainly proceeds with the discussion of the novel *Light in August* and the embodiment of the post-colonialism in *Light in August*.

As a complicated theory, post-colonialism criticizes the imperialistic colonial discourse in Europe and America by way of analyzing colonial literature. This dissertation analyzes the main character's identity in Faulkner's *Light in August* through post-colonialism, points out that it is the racial discrimination and social forces that cause Joe Christmas' ambiguous identity. Joe Christmas cannot use the hybridity strategy to fight against the racial system, and his attitude toward the society and the people is also partly responsible for his final death. The searching for identity shows the effects of poisoning and destruction of colonialist values on human beings, and the ambiguity of identity is also an accusation and satire of the racial system.

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter One introduces post-colonialism. Through briefly introducing American post-colonial literature, and analyzing the definition of it and colonial discourse, it shows Faulkner as a post-colonial writer of colonialism, colonizers and the colonized in the south of the United States. Chapter Two introduces the background of *Light in August*. The novel is concerned with a period in which the classification of humanity has been intensified by World War I. Chapter Three analyzes the identity of Joe Christmas in the context of colonial discourse. It introduces colonial discourse, analyzes the indeterminacy of identity, and points out the way from indeterminacy to determinacy through colonial discourse, and shows that racism is a kind of subjective prejudice without any objective basis. Chapter Four explains that from Christmas's early life to his final death, we can see that the ambiguity and indeterminacy of identity is a revelation and criticism of the

racialist system and colonialist values. Chapter Five shows the aspects of Joe Christmas's death: women's responsibility, racial discrimination and social forces. In a word, it is the colonialist values and Joe Christmas' own attitude toward society and people that lead to his final death. Chapter Six concludes that American South in the early twentieth century still uses race as a rationale to separate human beings' living environment, and any ambiguity in identity is not allowed. Joe Christmas' trying to know himself is doomed to end in failure and ruin. He doesn't know himself in his own mind, but outsiders want to shape him. His desire of wanting to know who he is leads to Christmas' disaster and causes his final death.

On the whole, the uncertain identity displays that the essence of issue is not whether one really has black blood or not, it is about the poisoning and destructive effect of the traditional concept on human beings. It also expresses that racism is a kind of subjective prejudice without any objective basis. The ambiguous identity not only reveals and criticizes the racial system, but also strengthens the tragedy of people in the modern world

Key words: post-colonialism; identity; Joe Christmas

摘要

威廉·福克纳是 20 世纪公认的美国最具影响力的小说家之一。本论文着重讨论福克纳所创作的《八月之光》并以后殖民理论解读文本中的表现的美国特定的社会、历史、种族、宗教和伦理等现象。

“后殖民理论”作为一种复杂的批评理论，一般是指通过对殖民文学的剖析，对欧美的帝国主义殖民话语所进行的反思和批判。本文运用后殖民理论对福克纳的《八月之光》中的人物身份问题进行剖析，指出小说主人公克瑞斯默斯的不明身份是种族歧视和社会压力的结果，同时身处困境的主人公也无法像后殖民理论所设想的那样，能动地运用混杂策略，对种族主义制度进行反击，只能成为孱弱无力的牺牲品，并且他自己对于社会和人们的态度也最终导致他的死亡。由于身份问题而遭受的歧视和磨难表明了种族主义传统观念对人的毒害和摧残，身份未明的苦境也是对种族制度的讽刺和控诉。

论文分为六章，第一章主要介绍后殖民理论及其定义，通过对美国后殖民文学及对殖民主义话语进行简要介绍和分析，展示了作为后殖民作家的福克纳对于战后美国南方殖民主义、殖民者和被殖民者的理解。第二章介绍《八月之光》的时代背景，指出作为一部后殖民小说，这是对殖民话语所进行的具体化的表述。根据殖民主义价值观和种族主义传统文化的种族划分，是对人的精神和肉体上的伤害。第三章对在殖民话语环境下克瑞斯默斯的身份进行分析。首先是介绍《八月之光》中的殖民话语；其次对《八月之光》中的“不确定性”进行分析，指出从“不确定性”到所谓的“确定性”是通过殖民话语实现的，表明种族主义纯粹是一种毫无客观基础的主观偏见。第四章分析展示了克瑞斯默斯寻找身份之路。他的追寻可分为幼年、青少年、中年以及最后死亡四个阶段。指出这种身份的模糊性和不确定性的根本原因是对种族主义传统观念和种族制度的揭露和批判。第五章分析克瑞斯默斯死因的各个方面，指出这里既有外界的压力也有克瑞斯默斯自身的原因。第六章总结在 20 世纪初的美国南部还是以种族为准则来分隔人的生存环境，那样的氛围不容许在黑白问题上有丝毫的含糊。这使得克瑞斯

莫斯处境日益艰难，并导致其死亡。总之，这种身份的不确定性表明问题的实质不在于一个人身上是否真有黑人血统，而在于种族主义的传统观念对人的毒害和摧残，它同样表明种族主义纯粹是一种毫无客观基础的主观偏见，这种身份的不确定性的根源是种族主义的偏见，同时也加重了身处困境的现代人的悲剧色彩。

关键词：后殖民主义；身份；克瑞斯默斯

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Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Post-Colonialism and Literature

The post-colonial desire is the desire of decolonized communities for an identity. Unlike the New Critics, who believed that the language of literature was somehow different from the language of science and everyday conversation, the post modernists insist that the language of texts is not distinct from the language used to analyze such writings. For these critics, all language is discourse. In other words, the discourse or culturally bound language of ideas used in literary analysis helps shape and form the text being analyzed. We cannot separate, they maintain, the text and the language used to critique it. For these critics, language helps create what we call “objective reality.”

Believing that objective reality can be created by language, many post modernists posit that all reality is a social construct. From this point of view, no single or primary objective reality exists, but many realities. Thus, in disavowing a universal, objective reality, these critics assert that reality is perspectival, with each individual creating his or her subjective understanding of the nature of reality itself. How, then, do we come to agree upon public and social concerns, such as values, ethics, and the common good, if reality is different for each individual? The answer for many post-modern thinkers is that each society or culture contains within itself a dominant cultural group who determines that culture’s ideology or, using the Marxist term, its sense of personal self-worth. All people in a given culture are consciously and unconsciously asked to conform to the prescribed hegemony.

What happens, however, when one’s ideas, one’s thinking, or one’s personal background do not conform? What happens, for example, when the dominant culture consists of white, Anglo-Saxon males and one is a black female? Or how does one respond to a culture dominated by these white males when one is a Native American? For people of color living in Africa or the others, the traditional answer has been

articulated by the dominant class and its accompanying hegemony: silence. Live quietly, work quietly, think quietly; deny yourself and all will be well.

Post-colonialism can be defined as an approach to literary analysis that particularly concerns itself with literature written in English in formerly colonized countries. It usually excludes literature that represents either British or American viewpoints and concentrates on writings from colonized or formerly colonized cultures in Australia, New Zealand, Africa, South America, and other places that were once dominated by, but remained outside of the white, male, European cultural, political, and philosophical tradition. Often referred to as “third world literature” by Marxist critics ---- a term many other critics call third pejorative ---- post colonial literature and its theorists investigate what happens when two cultures clash and, more specifically, what happens when one of them, with its accessory ideology, empowers and deems itself superior to the other. From the perspective of many white westerners, the peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Asia (as the Irish before them) were “heathens,” possessing heathen ways that therefore, at whatever cost, must be Christianized. How one treats peoples thus defined does not really matter, for many westerners subscribe to the colonialist ideology that all races other than the white are inferior or subhuman. These subhumans or “savages” quickly become the inferior and equally “evil” Others.

However post-colonialism maybe defined and it covers diverse and numerous issues. It becomes evident when we examine the various topics discussed in one of its most prominent texts, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995). Its subjects include universality, difference, nationalism, postmodernism, representation and resistance, ethnicity, feminism, language, education, history, place, and production. As diverse as these topics appear to be, all of them draw attention to one of post-colonialism's major concerns: highlighting the struggle that occurs when one culture is dominated by another. As post-colonial critics are ever ready to point out, to be colonized is “to be removed from history.” In its interaction with the conquering culture, the colonized or indigenous culture is forced to go

underground or to be obliterated.

Only after colonization occurs, and the colonized people have had time to think and then to write about their oppression and loss of cultural identity, does post-colonial theory come into existence. Born out of the colonized peoples' frustrations, their direct and personal cultural clashes with the conquering culture, and their fears, hopes, and dreams about the future and their own identities, post-colonial theory slowly emerges.

As a complicated theory, post-colonialism criticizes the imperialistic colonial discourse in Europe and America by way of analyzing colonial literature. The attitude and assumption which facilitated colonial domination and which foster the continued centrality of a western worldview have long been resisted by colonials and post-colonials. The resistance to and rejection of colonialist power is reflected in literature and art as post-colonials attempt to examine and minimize the influence of the colonial past on their present existence. They seek to reconstruct and value their pre-colonial worlds as foundations for a post-colonial future. Those who oppose post-colonial literature view it as attempting to replace western historical narrative and fear its encroachment into their protected territory. Even proponents of post-colonial literature view the works as necessarily opposing western history and in doing so privilege the imperialist position as central. Helen Tiffin, a leading post-colonial theorist, describes the "prime impulse" of all post-colonial literature as the "dis/mantling, de/mystification and unmasking of European authority" and the subsequent "retrieval or creation" of an identity independent of imperial hegemony (171). He also describes post-colonialism as writing and reading practices "grounded in some form of colonial experience occurring outside Europe but as a consequence of European expansion into and exploitation of 'the other' worlds" (170). The definition offered in *The Empire Writes Back* includes "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the movement of colonization to the present day" (2). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin extend their consideration of colonialist effects into the present "because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by

European imperial aggression” which influence contemporary literature. In embracing these definitions, I define the colonial “subject” as one who has been effectively “othered” by western colonial domination, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, and who subsequently struggles for self-definition and self-determination against historical and contemporary colonialist control. I recognize that colonialism has taken innumerable forms worldwide and respects the differences inherent in each colonial experience. Therefore, I find it important to note that I am addressing American post-colonial literature, writing which responds to the colonization in America. William Faulkner’s writing arises out of and responds to the creation and colonization of a dark-skinned, “inferior” other in America.

In examining American post-colonial literature, it is important to establish those characteristics of colonial domination against which American post-colonial writers struggle: the silencing of history and the control of identity. Having long been freed from the physical bonds of colonization, post-colonials have undertaken the task of recovering the history and cultural identities hidden by colonial rule. Each author attempts to rescue ---- through reconstruction ---- his or her versions of American history, locating their place in the past to ensure a place in the future. Post-colonials recognize that the discourse of colonial domination not only decides what is valued and preserved of their pasts but also determines the west’s present view of them as well as their view of themselves; subsequently, colonialist discourse shapes their possibilities for the future. Thus, post-colonial writers use their literature to bring attention to and to value those aspects of their history, culture, and forms of knowledge, which have been denied existence and validity in the western worldview. They demand acknowledgment of their pasts in order to secure their place in the future. Themes of displacement, disenfranchisement, and denial are important in post-colonial literature; however, American post-colonial writers focus less on the process and products of colonialism and more on exposing the tools of colonialist power and employing them to recover those elements of pre-colonial culture which colonialism has displaced.

American post-colonial writers examine the ways in which the West employs language and literacy, history, Manichean characterization and hegemony to devalue pre-colonial orality, memory, and myth. Abdul R. JanMohamed describes Manichean characterization as “a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and other, subject and object” (82). Colonizers employ such characterization in order to assert their moral superiority and to justify their domination. To maintain racial superiority, the colonizer must claim racial purity and therefore rejects post-colonial hybridity and syncreticity ---- the biological and cultural fusions resulting from colonial incursions into new worlds. Additionally, American post-colonial writers attempt to expose linearity, teleology, realism, and univocality as western literary traditions which mask and silence those systems of knowledge often revered in pre-colonial societies ---- the circularity of existence, the “magical”, and the communal. The “prime impulse,” then, of American post-colonial writers, turns not simply to oppose and rewrite imperial history, but rather to exorcise the regional, national or racial afflictions arising out of the experience of colonization. While post-colonial narrative strategies are constrained, to a certain extent, by the necessity of responding to the particular catalyst of colonialism, they allow, nevertheless, an area of freedom within which post-colonial subjects can assert their own voices.

Essentially, post-colonial literature shows that the western master narrative is accepted uncritically and exposes the ways in which our acceptance of the authoritative, a priori discourse of colonialism shapes our lives. As a facet of European imperialism, American colonialism is founded on similar assumptions of authority and gives rise to parallel problems. Faulkner shows the assumption that colonialism, as discourse and imperial institution, deprived the colonized of their own history and denied them the possibility of entering western historical narrative on their own terms, thus prescribing them to a history designed for them by their dominators (Goellnicht,

295). Further, colonialism deprived the colonized of cultural control ---- the right to define, interpret, value and represent indigenous beliefs, traditions and knowledge ---- a state tantamount to spiritual extermination, so cultural identity is also a very important issue in post-colonialism. It refers to “who am I”, “how did I develop into the person I am?” “To what country or countries or to what cultures am I forever linked?” It is the symbol needed for a group or an individual to define its own cultural characteristics.

In his description of American attitudes toward the Orient (which one can argue parallel the traditional American colonialist attitudes towards the colonized), Said writes regarding the silencing of the colonized by the western master narrative:

The net effect of this remarkable omission...is to keep the region and its people conceptually emasculated, reduced to “attitudes,” “trends,” “statistics”: in short, dehumanized. Since... a poet or novelist...writes of his values, of his humanity...he effectively disrupts the various patterns, images, clichés, abstractions by which [his culture] is represented. (Said, 291)

In rescuing and employing pre-colonial tradition and narrative strategies such as orality, memory, mythology, and multivocality, post-colonial literature automatically counters historical and literacy omissions of western narrative, thus engaging in the disruption of colonial discourse. The post-colonialist problematizes traditional historiography by recounting “populist” rather than “elitist” history; undermines traditional historical sources such as genealogies, news accounts, maps, and official records by relying on memory and focusing on folk tradition and myth; and questions the possibility of objective and authoritative sources by presenting multiple and conflicting points of view. As Said surmises, the post-colonialist uses narrative to introduce an “opposing point of view, perspective. Consciousness to the unitary web of vision” (291), however, the goal is not simply to replace one totalizing view with another. The goal is to open the possibility of multiple perspectives.

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