

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the study background, outlines the research questions, objective of the study, significance of the study, and defines the scope and limitations of study.

1.1 Background of the Study

Structuralism as an approach in literary studies views text as a system of signs that constructs meaning through the relationships, differences, and contradictions between its elements. One of the main concepts in structuralism is binary opposition, which is a pair of concepts that are contradictory but interdependent in forming a structure of meaning. Roland Barthes developed this idea by emphasizing that meaning in a text does not arise from a single element or from the author's intention, but rather from a network of signs that are interrelated and contradictory, thereby producing connotative and ideological meaning. Therefore, literary analysis through a structuralist perspective requires careful reading of the patterns of sign relations and conflicts that form the basis of meaning in a text (Barthes, 1972; Barthes, 1977).

Claudia Rankine's work in *Citizen: An American Lyric* is a relevant object for this approach because it is constructed from fragments of poetry, lyrical prose, and visual images that depict experiences of racism in everyday life. Through these fragments, Rankine presents microaggressions, stereotypes, and social wounds experienced by Black individuals, which are structured through oppositions such as Black/White, Center/Margin, and Visibility/Invisibility. These oppositions reveal how racial relations operate as a structural system that shapes social experience. The hybrid nature of the work further reinforces this structure, as text and visuals interact to produce layered meanings and emotional responses. This interaction aligns with Tazreiter's (2020) argument that visual culture plays a crucial role in conveying the emotional and political experiences of marginalization.

In line with this, contemporary literary works often present experimental forms by combining poetry, prose, and visual elements, making the representation

of social issues more complex. *Citizen: An American Lyric* can be categorized as a hybrid lyric text that blurs the boundaries between poetry and prose. As argued by Jonathan Culler (2015) and Marjorie Perloff, contemporary poetry increasingly incorporates visual and documentary elements as part of its aesthetic structure. The work is structured into seven parts that contain various forms, including lyric fragments, prose narratives, and visual images, which function as interconnected fragments rather than a linear narrative. In this study, the analysis focuses on four main fragments: microaggressions in Part I, the narrative of Serena Williams in Parts II–III, incidents with white friends in Parts IV–VI, and visual images in Part VII, with selected data taken from each fragment to support the analysis.

Claudia Rankine is a contemporary American poet known for her innovative literary forms and her engagement with social issues, particularly racism. One of her most influential works is *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), which received several major literary awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry and the Forward Prize for Best Collection, and was also nominated for the National Book Award. The work has been widely praised not only for its aesthetic qualities but also for its powerful representation of everyday racial discrimination (Smith, 2015).

In this work, Rankine presents discrimination through poetic and narrative fragments that reveal the tension between white and Black identities shaped by historical and social conditions. These identities appear as a persistent “historical self,” influencing even ordinary interactions in everyday life.

Citizen not only represent social reality but also serve as arenas where the ideological structures of society are formed and presented through language and narrative. Through characters, conflicts, and storylines, literature reflects the values, norms, and assumptions that prevail in society, while also providing space for readers to interpret or critique them, as in the literary works of Claudia Rankine that will be analysed. Eagleton's (1996) view, which asserts that modern literary texts function as arenas where social and ideological tensions are articulated through aesthetic forms. Thus, literary texts not only reflect reality but also actively shape

understandings of the social world and power relations, while also serving as a medium for critical reflection on existing social, political, and cultural conditions.

In addition to presenting experiences of discrimination, *Citizen* also conveys an ideological message about how racism operates as a power structure. According to Barthes, ideology works through a system of signs that normalizes power relations, and in this context, *Citizen* shows how white supremacy is maintained through language, imagery, and social practices. This ideology appears not only in the narrative content, but also in how the text constructs a binary opposition between domination and marginalization. Thus, the analysis of binary opposition in *Citizen* not only reveals meaning but also reveals how this text constructs an ideological critique of structural racism in American society.

Several previous studies have examined *Citizen: An American Lyric* from different perspectives. Donna Maria Alexander (2015) emphasizes that the work reveals how racism is embedded in everyday life through repeated microaggressions. In addition, *Citizen* is recognized for its hybrid form, combining poetry, prose, and visual elements, where fragmented texts reflect the fragmented reality of discrimination. Alexander (2015) also argues that the interaction between text and image is not merely aesthetic, but functions as a strategy for conveying meaning. Similarly, Lauren Berlant (2017) views *Citizen* as an affective text that connects personal experiences with the collective trauma of Black communities.

Building on these perspectives, this study focuses not only on the theme of racism but also on how meaning is constructed structurally through the interaction of textual and visual elements. The use of poetic language, narrative fragments, and visual images forms a system of signs that produces patterns of opposition and ideological meaning within the work.

The main issue raised by Rankine is the tension between White Americans and Black Americans, so that this binary opposition forms a social discourse framework, in which white people are often positioned as the center and black people as the margins. Cutter Mendenhall (2016) in the essay analysis *Fragments and Foreignness in Claudia Rankine's Citizen* shows that Rankine reveals

experiences of microaggression as fragments that reflect the structure of racial domination.

To examine this opposition, this study uses structuralism theory in literary analysis. Structuralism, developed by figure of Roland Barthes, focuses on the system of relationships and patterns underlying a text. According to Saussure (1916), a sign is not a thing but a relationship between the signifier (sound/image) and the signified (concept). In this context, the binary opposition between White and Black is a relationship between two mutually determining signs, where the concept of White is often positioned as dominant values or “norms,” while Black functions as “the other” or marginal. Saussure further asserts that “meaning arises not from the direct presence of the sign but from its difference from other signs.” This creates an interdependent structure between signs in the text, including the binary opposition constructed in “*Citizen*”.

Roland Barthes (1967) argues that meaning in a text is constructed through systems of differences and oppositions, which can produce ideological meanings or myths. In this context, the opposition between White and Black in *Citizen: An American Lyric* reflects not only cultural differences but also historically constructed power relations.

Previous studies on *Citizen* have mainly focused on its socio-political themes, affective dimensions, and hybrid form (Alexander, 2015; Mendenhall, 2016; Berlant, 2017; Stovall & Whiting, 2019). However, there is still a gap in analysing how binary oppositions are structurally constructed, particularly in relation to racial and visual elements. Therefore, this study aims to analyse how binary oppositions are constructed in the text through a structuralist approach, in order to reveal the underlying systems of meaning that shape racial discourse

1.2 Research Question

Based on this background, the research question is:

1. What binary oppositions are constructed in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*
2. How ideological meanings are constructed in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*

1.3 Objective of the Study

Based on this background, this study aims to:

1. Analyse what binary oppositions are constructed through the poetic, narrative language, and visual structure of *Citizen: An American Lyric*.
2. To interpret the ideological meanings produced through those binary oppositions.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this study is expected to add insight and broaden literary studies, particularly in the application of structuralism to contemporary hybrid texts such as *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Until now, structuralism has been more commonly applied to conventional literary works. Therefore, its application to texts that combine lyric poetry, prose, essays, and images can help demonstrate how structure and binary oppositions work in more diverse forms. Thus, this study provides a concrete example of how theory can be applied to contemporary literary works.

Practically, this study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how literary texts represent important issues such as racism and power relations through language and form. This understanding can equip readers, writers, or literature students to view literary works not only as a means of expression but also as a medium for social criticism. This study is also expected to open a broader discussion on socio-cultural dynamics in America, especially regarding identity formation and interracial relations, so that the reading of literary works can be more relevant to the social context being discussed.

1.5 Scope and Limitations of Study

This study focuses on the textual structure of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, particularly on how binary oppositions are constructed through poetic and narrative language. The analysis is limited to linguistic and structural elements such as diction, imagery, rhythm, and narrative pattern that represent oppositional meanings, including White / Black, visibility / invisibility, and margin / center.

The textual limitation of this study lies in its focus on selected sections of *Citizen* that most clearly demonstrate binary tensions. These include the lyrical fragment that describes everyday microaggressions in part I, the prose narrative about Serena Williams in parts II & III, situational narrative “Incidents with White Friends” in parts IV-VI, and visual sign images in part VII. Four main quotes were taken from each fragment, and two images were taken from the visuals. The analysis does not attempt to examine the entire book in exhaustive detail but rather concentrates on representative passages that embody the structural oppositions relevant to the study.

This study also does not address readers’ affective or psychological responses, nor does it explore broader sociological issues such as class, gender, or nationality. The focus remains on how racial meaning is constructed within the text itself through internal linguistic and structural relations.

Roland Barthes’s structuralism is applied in this study because it provides a precise theoretical framework for examining how meaning is produced through relationships, differences, and oppositions among signs. His concept of the text as a network of interacting signs allows this study to analyse *Citizen* not merely as a social document, but as a literary structure in which racial meaning emerges from the internal dynamics of language.