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The Portrayal of Domestication in *How to Train Your Dragon I*

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ABSTRACT

This paper endeavors to reveal the portrayal of domestication in *How to Train Your Dragon I*. This film is based on a collection of books written by Cressida Cowell, and important to be discussed due to some reasons. First, the film is adapted as an animated film with PG (Parental Guidance) status. It makes parents to concern with its narrative because it contains entertainment and education values. Second, the film adaption converts the original size of the dragon, Toothless, from small green to big black dragon. This conversion invites questions from the writers of this paper as it has impacts on the portrayal of the dragon. Third, *How to Train Your Dragon I* is a 2010 fiction film adaptation directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois under Dream Works production which introduces the point of view of colonial discourses illustration through the domestication as the result of relationship between white human character namely Hiccup and black non-human character namely Toothless. Moreover, Edward Said colonial discourse is used to analyze the portrayal of domestication captured through Hiccup-Toothless relationship from taming to owning. This paper used qualitative method followed by observing preferred shots showing the portrayal of domestication process and analyzing them through colonial discourse. The result of the paper criticizes that Toothless' domestication followed by the rest of dragons represents and emphasizes the white superiority over black non-human character.

KEYWORDS: domestication, colonial discourse, animation.

Franz Fanon, as cited by Bressler, argues that an entire new world must come into being to overcome the binary system in which black is evil and white is good (Bressler, 2007, p. 239). This statement invites critical thinking over human beings

towards films or literatures which portray that binary opposition. It leads to a question whether it is used to show and emphasize that Whites are good and superior or Blacks are bad and inferior. Therefore, the emergence of binary opposition which presents white-black opposition in animated films rated as Parental Guidance requires further reading as it is assumed that it has implicit meaning.

How to Train Your Dragon I is an animation movie directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois released in 2010. This movie is adapted from a book written by Cressida Cowell in 2003. The most intriguing part of the adapted movie is the changing feature of Night Fury, a dragon later named Toothless by Hiccup, a Viking. In the book, Toothless is a tiny green dragon classified as common or garden dragon. While in movie, Toothless converts into a big black powerful dragon. This becomes the reason why, in the book, Hiccup names his dragon 'Toothless' since it does not have teeth. Consequently, it takes to the writers of the paper's assumption of the existence of binary opposition cases inserted in Hiccup-Toothless/white-black relationship in this film.

How to Train Your Dragon I is a story of Hiccup, a teenage Viking who lives with his tribe in Berk Island. Berk has been continuously raided by dragons, prompting a war between them and the tribe. In order to be considered as a true Viking, Hiccup must be able to kill a dragon. At first he would like to prove it, but he could not execute it since he met Night Fury. Stoick, his father and also the chief of the tribe, was sad with this fact. Actually, the beginning of the movie was started with dragons' attack towards people in Berk. Vikings were fighting against dragons, but Hiccup tried with his own catapult to hit a dragon. He succeeded bringing down a dragon that nobody believed it was Night Fury, the legendary dragon. Hiccup decided not to kill Night Fury for he was unable to fly. When Hiccup had his dragon training, Gobber, his

father's friend, told Hiccup that a dragon always goes in for the kill. From these words, it can be identified that a dragon is noticed as dangerous creature or devil. After Hiccup found the dragon, he recorded some actual information about Toothless. Hiccup tried to get closer to the dragon by offering fish and drawing in dirt to attempt to touch it. On the next day after Hiccup learned from Gobber, a trainer, that a dragon without its wings or tail cannot fly, Hiccup understood why Toothless could not leave the cove. Hiccup tried to get it to fly again through the use of an artificial tail fin. Later, he made perfect his design of the fake fin and helped Toothless to take a successful flight around the island. It resulted in a good relationship between Hiccup and Toothless.

Although Hiccup and Toothless are portrayed having good relationship, implicitly there is a strong process of domestication involving binary opposition issue. Binary opposition is an issue which becomes a starting point to discuss colonial discourses. Colonial discourse is a system of statements that can be made about colonies and colonial peoples, about colonizing powers, and about the relationship between these two (Ashcroft, 2007, p. 38). Moreover, those statements emphasize that colonized is more inferior to colonizer which applies its power to rule and to advance the civilization of the colony through its cultural and moral improvement. Colonizers legitimize their domination over colonized people and consider colonization as burden. Colonizers mainly dominated by Whites have burden to civilize the colonized people considered marginal, uncivilized, and savage from Whites' perspective. Thereafter, colonizer clearly affirms colonial discourse which historically cannot be separated from imperialism and colonialism idea. So, these arguments become the colonizer's reason mainly dominated by European countries to inject the idea of Eurocentrism.

The idea of Whites' superiority implicitly stated in Eurocentrism could also exist towards non-human character in films. Movies such as *Free Willy (1993)*, *Lassie*

(1994), *Air Bud* (1997), *King Kong* (2005), and *Hachiko* (2009) are the examples of how Whites character show their ability to domesticate and show superiority over non-human characters. Most of them are about human beings-pets relationships, specifically dogs. However, the binary opposition of Whites and Blacks emerge in *Free Willy* and *King Kong*. Animals' domestication portrayed in films could be considered as human beings' effort to be the nature protector and to show how animals are domesticated by Whites' values. This process requires further discussion when animals or non-human characters are represented in black, instead of other colors, which is the opposition of white. In addition, *How to Train Your Dragon I* is different from *Free Willy* and *King Kong* which are not animated films. *How to Train Your Dragon I* is a fable animation film. Animation films with fable genres, a story of teaching moral lesson through animal characters, are created to deliver messages to children. A fable animation film has significant role in delivering cross-cultural understanding because the obvious visual appeal of picture books conveyed through fable story could be directed toward stimulating interest in the geography and cultures of other lands (Chen, 1981). This argument adds the importance of visual reading on fable animation films across cultures.

Previously, there are some studies discussing *How to Train Your Dragon* or the relationship between human beings and animals in literary works or analysis on Whites' supremacy in animated films. First is a study done by Dawid Kobińska titled *Vikings in Cinema: a case study of How to Train Your Dragon*, Kobińska's study more focuses on Vikings' representations. He criticizes that Vikings are only represented as warriors and masculine, Hiccup struggles to have different representation of a male masculine Viking (Kobińska, 2013). Moreover, he also argues that Vikings-dragons relationship could be read as native-immigrant relationship. Second is a research done

by Oana Leventi-Perez titled *Disney's Portrayal of Non-Human Animals in Animated Films between 2000 and 2010*. This study covers abundant portrayals of non-human animals in Disney's animated films, but *How to Train Your Dragon* is excluded. The results of this study are the promotion of speciesism and the celebration of humanity superiority. Specifically, this study also discusses domestication, but it has different focus. Many Disney's animated films use domestication to meet human beings' need such as transportation, protection, food production, trade, and scientific research, and they are raised in captivity and rendered dependant on human beings (Leventi-Perez, 2011). Third is a bachelor thesis done by Diannita Rachmawati titled *Blackness in Megamind Character of Tom McGrath's Megamind*. The results of the study indicate that stereotypes can be found in an animated film with non-human character. Blackness emerges in Megamind character colored blue by the filmmaker. Megamind affirms two out of three of the grammar race or characteristics of Blacks as argued by Stuart Hall which are slave and clown figures (Rachmawati, 2013). Even though black vernacular and black physical characteristic do not emerge, Megamind as a non-human character could own Black's representation. Therefore, these previous studies inspire the study on *The Portrayal of Domestication in How to Train Your Dragon I* because the writers of this paper would like to fill the empty spaces left by them. The critique towards the existence of domestication must be considered by the readers to open a possibility of binary opposition inserted in colonial discourse which could be read from several parts of the movie.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applies qualitative approach conducted with two different techniques which are technique of data collection and technique of data analysis. The primary data is *How to Train Your Dragon I* directed by Chris Sanders and Dean

DeBlois. The primary source is Edward Said's colonial discourses, while the secondary sources are another sources supported the analysis such as more arguments on colonial discourses, and non-narrative analysis. The technique of data collection is conducted by sorting the scenes including shots and dialogues that represent the portrayal of domestication, especially related to colonial discourses, in *How to Train Your Dragon I* film. Those shots and dialogues are analyzed comprehensively through narrative and non-narrative analysis. The narrative analysis focuses on how the narrative element of the movie portrays domestication in the movie has close relationship to colonial discourse because after domestication Toothless and other dragons become Vikings' pet instead of living freely. In addition, the non-narrative analysis focuses on how non-narrative elements such as camera's angle, colors, gestures, costumes, and lighting build the close relationship between domestication and colonial discourses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Toothless as a Non-Human Character

Toothless' size and color changing from small green to big black dragon raises questions and curiosity from the writers of the paper. It opens a possibility for colonial discourses inserted implicitly in the movie. To elaborate the discussion, the writers figure out the directors' explanation why Toothless' size and color change. Dean DeBlois as one of *How to Train Your Dragon I* directors reveals that Toothless is much more mammalian in his design and characteristic. Moreover, Chris Sanders, the other director, expresses that Toothless' size and color emphasize the expected terror as black color made Toothless disappeared in the night sky and big size creates more sense of terror, a ghost character for Vikings (DeBlois, Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois Talk *How to Train Your Dragon*, 2010). Consequently, Toothless owns

unique character since he has a dragon character with distinctively pet-like qualities derived from his mammalian design and a powerful character derived from his size and color.

In addition, as a dragon, Toothless affirms the Western concept of dragons. Besides the movie setting closely related to Vikings and their environment, dragons in Western culture have ability to breath fire, own great wings and sharp claws. They are featured strongly in ornaments, ships, and weaponry (Cowell, 2003). Cowell explanations answer the portrayal of Toothless which becomes the main threat of Vikings at the beginning of the story. Toothless often attacks Vikings. Together with other dragons, Toothless become Vikings' main threat and enemy due to his ferocity. This characteristic compounds the idea of Western dragon with black color. As a result of this composition, the black dragon means mysterious creature which brings terror and has evil character. However, Hiccup's ability to tame and domesticate Toothless brings another perspective on the implicit meaning beyond the relationship between white human character and black non-human character.

Hiccup taming ability emerges question on how non-human characters, especially animals, are portrayed in movies. Toothless is an animal character in fable story that originally cannot talk and has no race. Indeed, animals are completely different from human and categorized as 'the other' in natural history. However, some researchers such as Roberts and Baker found that binary oppositions could be relegated to conceptualize the relationship between human and animal. Steve Baker states that this attitude toward animal is typically a projection of attitudes towards groups of humans considered inferior (Baker, 1993). In addition, Mark Roberts points out that the reason for this projection is simple; "animals do not have to be treated in the same way as humans are. Their entire natural history demonstrates their inferiority, and this

inferiority, via theoretical tinkering, popular prejudices, and just plain bad science can be transferred effortlessly from one species to another” (Roberts, 2008). These explanations confirm the inferiority of animals in human beings-animals relationships. Even though the animals are portrayed wildly, they still can be tamed or even domesticated through the human beings’, specifically Whites’ superiority.

Toothless’ Domestication

When there was fight between Vikings and dragons, Hiccup successfully caught Toothless. To be accepted as the member of Berk Island, Hiccup should kill Toothless. However, he saved Toothless instead of killing him.

Figure 1. Hiccup saved Toothless instead of killing him.
(DeBlois, *How to Train Your Dragon*, 2010, p. 00:12:05)

By cutting the ropes Hiccup releases Toothless. This process requires Hiccup’s great consideration since he is doubtful whether he must kill Toothless and become a true Viking or he should let Toothless free as he is unable to fly after Hiccup takes down his tail. This moment becomes the beginning of domestication started by Hiccup’s effort to become a Viking. The writers of this paper argue that Hiccup’s decision has two meanings. First, it shows Hiccup’s responsibility towards Toothless. Second, it signs Hiccup’s different way to conquer Toothless. Conquering strong, black, non-

human character considered as the other from Europeans' perspective has further impact than killing it.

Non-narrative analysis of figure 1 can be observed from camera's angle, colors, lighting, and gestures. Figure 1 uses full shot with eye level angle. Full shot has great impact on social distance, while eye level angle permits the audiences to make up their minds about what kind of people are being presented (Giannetti, 2002, p. 17). The writers of the paper argue that figure 1 is important to open the audiences' mind about the action of Hiccup as a white human character. From the shot and angle, figure 1 focuses on the gestures of Hiccup and Toothless. Toothless is helpless and his eyes are looking at Hiccup as if he really needs Hiccup's assistance. Toothless is tied, and Hiccup releases him by using a knife. This action could be read as White's superiority represented by Hiccup. The superiority involves Hiccup's ability to shoot Toothless down, tie, and release him. Moreover, the costume of Hiccup is also significant in bringing the further meaning and opposition. Hiccup wears green t-shirt. Green is part of cool colors which implies tranquility, aloofness, and serenity (Giannetti, 2002, p. 25). This color expresses Hiccup's intention who does not want to kill Toothless, he prefers to offer tranquility towards Toothless represented in black color as the symbol of savage, danger, and evil. In addition, the dominant color of figure 1 is grey and the low light lighting (stones, fog) can be read as a moment of Hiccup's doubt to kill or to release Toothless, the mysterious creature.

Consequently, the oppositions between Hiccup and Toothless support Said's statement on orientalism which constructs binary oppositions. In this sense, the filmmakers divide Hiccup and Toothless into two opposing sides, in which black, Toothless, is always opposite in relation to white. Within this term, the main character, Hiccup, represents the idea of white human beings' character that exists as self or

centre; he is white, good, and civilized. At the same time, his main opposite character, Toothless, represents the idea of ‘the other’ that exists as black, evil, savage, helpless, and wild. In the context of opposite, Said, as mentioned by Ashcroft, points out that this binary opposition exists to confirm that dominance in which one term of the opposition is always more dominant (Ashcroft, 2007, p. 19). This binary is a development of that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance, on which imperialism is based and which it actively perpetuates (Ashcroft, 2007, p. 20). It does not close the possibility that in *How to Train Your Dragon I*, white Hiccup may oppose to black Toothless. Hence, this phenomenon is assumed as symbolization of Hiccup as a white human character and Toothless as a black non-human animal character. Furthermore, the relationship between Hiccup and Toothless is characterized by civilizing mission of Hiccup through domestication.

Figure 2. Hiccup offers a fish to Toothless.
(DeBlois, *How to Train Your Dragon*, 2010, p. 00:26:57)

Figure 2 discusses the further step of domestication done by Hiccup initialized by offering food to Toothless. After Hiccup had decided to release Toothless, Hiccup joined Gobber to learn about dragons. At first Hiccup learned in order to understand dragons' characteristics but then he used the knowledge to domesticate Toothless.

While he was learning, Hiccup recorded and gathered much information about dragons. This act is considered as part of observation which becomes one of Whites' characteristics. Edward Said argues that the observer, who is the West, is deeply committed to the notion that the real world is external to the observer and that knowledge consists of recording and classifying data (Said, 1978, p. 46). Vikings are considered part of Whites and the West cultures emphasize the significance of observation before taking voyage or expedition. What Hiccup and his other Viking friends do is part of conquering the others, the dragons which become Vikings' enemy for centuries. Therefore, Hiccup is portrayed as a great observer. After he had released Toothless, he returned to observe how Toothless lived. This observation helped him to domesticate Toothless before mastering and having authority over Toothless, by an ability to ride it.

Non-narrative analysis of figure 2 will mainly focus on gestures and fish as a symbol of life. The way Toothless moves and looks emphasize his wildness. However, the portrayal of Toothless in this way is to confirm the weakness of the wild savage Toothless. By seeing the incapability of Toothless to fly, Hiccup was urged to help him. Through this view, it can be argued that Toothless could not save himself without a help from human beings. Thus, it can be assumed that the wild savage Toothless condition encourages Hiccup to do the civilizing mission. The binary opposition is clearly seen in figure 2 because White, Viking, civilized character is facing against Black, dragon, uncivilized non-human character. Therefore, a fish offered by Hiccup becomes the further explanation why civilizing mission is legitimized by the West as it offers better life for the others that need to be civilized. In addition, Hiccup offers a fish with his right hand which can be interpreted as polite etiquette for the others even though Hiccup is a left handed person.

Figure 3. Toothless lets Hiccup to touch him.
(DeBlois, *How to Train Your Dragon*, 2010, p. 00:31:08)

Figure 3 narrates a significant moment in Toothless' domestication. It was a moment when Hiccup was finally able to touch Toothless after observing his behavior. Figure 3 also becomes a melting moment for Toothless which considers Hiccup as his master due to his attention. Hiccup who previously learns Toothless figures out that dragons are not evil creatures that could not be tamed. Serious observation on dragons will help human beings to domesticate dragons. Figure 3 emphasizes the significance of touching which determines side owns more power. Touching is the most personal and intimate form of non-verbal communication which are varied across cultures. Each culture determines who is able to touch whom, on what parts of the body, and under what circumstances (Ferraro, 2008). Later, Ferraro also argues that Scandinavian countries are part of low-touch cultures since personal space is more respected highly. Hence, Hiccup's touching reflects intimate relationship between him and Toothless, and figure 3 clarifies that Hiccup is the one let by Toothless to touch. This can be assumed that the filmmakers would like to communicate the position of power between Hiccup and Toothless. It is proven that Hiccup has more power than Toothless.

The power relationship between Hiccup and Toothless is connected to what Ashcroft argues about knowledge and power. He argues that sides own power must

have authorities of what is known and the way it is known, and sides own such knowledge must have power over sides that do not. The connection between knowledge and power is particularly significant in the relationships between colonizers and colonize (Ashcroft, 2007, p. 64). Furthermore, Said states “an Oriental-European relation was that Europe was always in a position of strength, way of knowing the ‘Orient’, is a way of maintaining power over it, not to say domination” (Said, 1978, p. 40). Therefore, Hiccup’s action seems to support Ashcroft and Said’s statements. After gaining knowledge from Toothless through observation, Hiccup uses domestication to know Toothless better and to be the master of him. Hiccup’s way to know Toothless also can be argued as a way to maintain power over Toothless since he has knowledge about him, so automatically he has power to control Toothless. It seems also to support Said’s theory that Europe was always in a position of strength. The use of European culture, as the standard to which all other cultures, becomes the core of Eurocentrism (Tyson, 2006, p. 420).

Non-narrative analysis of figure 3 is dominated by Hiccup gesture. However, the camera’s angle, shot, lighting, and color also help the implicit meaning lying on figure 3. Hiccup’s touching which signifies his power over Toothless is supported by the right hand used by him. As explained in figure 2, Hiccup’s right hand etiquette emphasizes his politeness and civilized characteristic. As the representative of Europeans, Hiccup as a young Viking shows civilized attitude to black non-human character. Camera’s angle used in figure 2 is eye level, while the applied shot is medium shot. Giannetti explains that medium shot is used to clarify gestures, movement, and dialogues (Giannetti, 2002, p. 12). Moreover, the dominant color of this figure is dark supported by dark lighting which imply that Hiccup with his minor cool color (green) is able to overcome the dark side of Toothless. Therefore, these non-

narrative aspects conclude that filmmakers would not only like to emphasize Hiccup's dominance and Toothless' weak power position, but they also would like to explain the Hiccup's successful domestication.

After Hiccup had been successfully accepted by Toothless, he attempted to civilize Toothless. The writers of this paper assume that in order to deserve a life, Toothless has to be civilized through domestication. Civilization becomes an important element for colonizers considered themselves have more power and superiority than colonized people. Moreover, they also assume that their Anglo-European culture is civilized (Tyson, 2006, p. 419). This case becomes a quick decision to carry out the Europeans' role in determining the life of the others. When Toothless is considered civilized, that is what can bring him an ideal for living. This ideas is influenced by the assumption that European ideas, ideals, and experience are universal, that is, the standard for all humankind (Tyson, 2006, p. 420). This also may conclude that the civilization of the white human character becomes the standard for every civilization, including dragons.

In addition, Ashcroft mentions that colonization could be (re)presented as a virtuous and necessary 'civilizing' task involving education and paternalistic nurture (Ashcroft, 2007, p. 41). Here, Toothless is educated how to fly and behave based on Vikings' perspective. Since Toothless could not fly, Hiccup shows his civilized, educated characteristic by inventing artificial tail controlled by his feet to let him ride Toothless and help Toothless flies again. Hiccup inventions, which can be inferred from the film, are prosthetic tail piece, saddle, and stirrup gear change mechanism for flying. These inventions can be argued as Hiccup's agencies for mastering Toothless. The properties, such as prosthetic tail, saddle, and stirrup gear, then become Hiccup's power to ride Toothless. These inventions may also conclude as sophistication for

Hiccup as a civilized white man character. Creating sophisticated technology could be an evidence to justify the idea that it is only the Whites whose technology is more highly advanced are able to assist the others. Moreover, this seems to support David Spurr's reason that Whites have right to get authority over and to have responsibility for the others (Spurr, 1993). Additionally, this also seems to agree with Said's theory that Eurocentric way is the western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient (Said, 1978, p. 3)

How to Train Your Dragon promotes Whites' superiority which does not only consider wild animal associated with domestication, but also justify animal as subordinate to human beings. This film represents the Vikings having friendships with dragons. Yet, as long as dragons are civilized, they are accepted by Vikings, so they are allowed to live alongside human beings. However, dragons become domestic pet at the end of the story which might be assumed that in order to live together or alongside human beings, who are superior to animals or non-human characters, they must be subordinated.

Furthermore, the loss of free will idea seems to emerge in figure 4. Vikings do not only hold dragons as pet, but also own and control their life. Animals or non-human characters lose their rights to get freedom, Vikings decided to keep the dragons as pets rather than to let them free. This includes the view that animals/non-human characters do not have equal rights as human beings such as liberty and life. Assuming dragons have become bonded with human beings as their pets is similar to curtailing their freedom to live their own lives.

Figure 4. Toothless and the other dragons are domesticated by Vikings
(DeBlois, *How to Train Your Dragon*, 2010, p. 01:23:41)

Dean DeBlois, one of the filmmakers of *How to Train Your Dragon*, argues that in the animation, the filmmakers always channel behaviors observed in human beings' pets, the non-human characters are expected to be dogs, cats, or horses, so the filmmakers want Toothless to seem familiar (DeBlois, Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois Talk *How to Train Your Dragon*, 2010). Hence, the word 'familiar' can be assumed to show the inferiority of Toothless finally considered as a pet instead of a wild, free animal.

Non-narrative analysis of figure 4 focuses on camera's angle and shot, setting, lighting, color, and gestures. Camera's angle used in figure 4 is low angle which emphasizes confusion, heighten the importance of the subject, inspire fear, propaganda, or heroism (Giannetti, 2002, p. 17), and the applied shot is full shot which lets the audiences to interpret figure 4 in detail. The angle and shot explain the great audiences' confusion watching dragons, finally domesticated, become human beings' pet. Figure 4 also expands the confusion on how Hiccup and Astrid, young Vikings, smile and could show their dominance over wild dragons. Setting captured in Figure 4 adds the real ambience of Berk after dragons are domesticated. It becomes more peaceful signed by high contrast lighting and the dominance of green color over black

as Toothless' color. Since Toothless, that is the strongest dragons, is domesticated by Hiccup, other dragons follow him for the other young Vikings taught by Hiccup are able to do the same things to other dragons. Hence, the presence of Stormfly, the blue dragon standing alongside Toothless ridden by Astrid, emphasizes the tranquility (Giannetti considers blue is part of cool color) in Berk which emerges after dragons are domesticated.

CONCLUSION

Toothless' domestication followed by the rest of dragons represents and emphasizes the white superiority over black non-human character. Colonial discourses issues which mainly focuses on binary opposition are not only portrayed by the Toothless' conversion from tiny green to big black dragon, but also are begun from the way Hiccup rescues Toothless to the way he domesticates Toothless. The binary oppositions covering black-white, superior-inferior, civilized-uncivilized, and center-others issues are implied to maintain human beings' domination through the perspective of Eurocentrism. Consequently, this paper is expected to criticize implicit binary opposition issues which might appear in animated films with Parental Guidance rating in the future.

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