Identity and Ethnicity in John Agard's Poetry:

A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Identity and ethnicity attract the attention of most, if not all, discourse analysts for their importance in squeezing the ideology behind using certain linguistic constructions. The present study is an endeavour to plant a critical seed in the land of the poetry of the British poet, John Agard, to examine his language, mainly in his well-know poem "Half-Caste". It, therefore, basically aims at identifying the structure of the analytical framework of poetry from a critical discourse perspective as far as Agard's poetry is concerned. In accordance with its aims, this study hypothesises that the structure of the analytical framework of poetry is mapped in terms of three dimensions which are the structure of the poem, the textual analysis, and the social practice from a critical discourse perspective. For the sake of achieving its aims and testing the validity of its hypotheses, the present study follows certain steps. It mainly reviews the relevant literature about critical discourse analysis, the theme of the poem, its poet, and other critical issues. Moreover, it analyses the poem "Half-Caste" as a representative example via a model developed in the present study for this purpose. The present study has arrived at a diversity of conclusions, the most essential of them is that the structure of the analytical framework of poetry is mapped in terms of three dimensions: the structure of the poem, the textual

analysis, and the social practice from a critical discourse perspective to show the fluidity of identity and the

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## I. Introduction

roughness of ethnicity.

#### 1. 1 The Problem of the Study

Though only by words, language can amend society or even the whole world for a long period of time or even eternally. Literature, as usually described, is the mirror of societies and their languages. That is, it critically reflects the ideologies behind using any linguistic constructions. To a large extent, the British poet, John Agard, crafts a unique art of sculpting his own statue by means of language to elevate social crises in his community such as proving the identity and confirming one's ethnicity.

As they are still fresh and considerably worthwhile, Agard's poems have not been thoroughly studied from the eye of criticality of discourse analysis. Accordingly, there has been an unavoidable necessity to examine one of his poem to show its reflected ideology, the theme of identity, and the view of ethnicity in his poem "Half-Caste" from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. This knowledge void has motivated the

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present study to pioneer a CDA probe of Agard's "Half-Caste". Hence, the present study makes an attempt to answer the following questions as far as identity and ethnicity is concerned:

- 1. What is the structure of the analytical framework of poetry from a critical discourse perspective?
- 2. How does Agard manipulate his language in his poem "Half-Caste" to show the fluidity of identity?
  - 3. What are the ideologies reflected in Agard's poem "Half-Caste"?
  - 4. What are the figurative utilisations of language exploited to reflect such ideologies?
  - 5. How Agard's poetic discourse has given its voice of identity resistance?
  - 6. How does the social variable of ethnicity affect Agard's poem "Half-Caste"?
  - 7. How Agard's poetry has given its depth and breadth of cultural diversity?

## 1. 2 The Aims of the Study

In keeping with the above raised questions, the present study basically aims at:

- 1. Identifying the structure of the analytical framework of poetry from a critical discourse perspective.
- 2. Pinpointing the way by which Agard manipulates his language in his poem "Half-Caste" to show the fluidity of identity.
  - 3. Specifying the ideologies reflected in Agard's poem "Half-Caste".
  - 4. Figuring out the figurative uses of language that are exploited to reflect these ideologies.
  - 5. Showing how Agard's poetic discourse has given its voice of identity resistance.
  - 6. Showing the outcome of the social variable of ethnicity on Agard's poem "Half-Caste".
- 7. Detecting the way by which Agard's poetry has given its depth and breadth of cultural diversity.
- 8. Developing a critical discourse analysis model for analysing poems that considers both linguistic and social dimensions for analytical convenience.

## 1. 3 The Hypotheses of the Study

Taking into consideration the questions and the aims mentioned above, the following statements are hypothesised in the present study:

- 1. The structure of the analytical framework of poetry is mapped in terms of three dimensions: the structure of the poem, the textual analysis, and the social practice from a critical discourse perspective.
- 2. Agard manipulates his language to show the fluidity of identity by means of dialect hybridity in his poem "Half-Caste".
- 3. By adhering to certain strategies, Agard reflects the offensiveness and stupidity of ethnic and derogatory labels.

4. Satire, metaphor, pun, imagery, and repetition are the main obvious figurative uses of language that are exploited by Agard to reflect his ideologies.

- 5. By dint of his refusal to comply with being half-caste, Agard's poetic discourse has given its voice of identity resistance.
- 6. Agard champions his language as the measure of ethnicity to highlight his mixed race heritage.
- 7. Agard's poetry has given its depth and breadth of cultural diversity in terms of his mixed style of standard, non-standard, or dialectical use of language.

## 1. 4 The Procedure of the Study

With an eye toward answering the questions of the present study, fulfilling its aims, and verifying its hypotheses, the upcoming steps are followed:

- 1. Reviewing the relevant aspects about CDA, ideology, identity, and ethnicity, to grant a careful background of the study and the data at hand.
- 2. Considering the important issues about the poet, John Agard, and his poem, raises above all the important aspects within the scope of analysis.
- 3. Analysing the poem, "Half-Caste", as a representative example of the critical discourse analysis.
  - 4. Discussing the findings obtained from the analysis to arrive at some conclusions.

It is worth noting here the fact that due to the uniqueness of the study of Agard's poetry under the rubric of CDA, and the amalgamation of identity and ethnicity within this analysis, the present study is based on the researchers' reflections from social and critical standpoints. It does so by highlighting the appropriate social context of the poem to analyse its linguistic structure. Hence, it adopts a qualitative method that may help to understand how and why particular linguistic constructions take place in poetry.

# II. John Agard's Poetry from the Eyes of CDA

#### 2.1 CDA

Throughout his research journey, Gee (1999: 8) certificates that various approaches to discourse analysis can be distinguished. Some approaches mainly consider the structure of language and the way in which that structure activates meanings in specific contexts. Other approaches are quite careful about the tenor of the used language and the addressed themes. In this respect, Bloor and Bloor (2007: 2) assure that the approach that keeps tabs to the content is CDA. Indeed, it is very attentive to the needs of examining the manner in which a particulate discourse is used to achieve social aims, social change, and social maintenance. Devoting itself to spoken or written texts, CDA, uniquely, has an eye on the analysis and description of the linguistic structure as well as the social processes which both give rise to the production of certain sort of texts.

As a further matter, CDA, as Fairclough and Kress (1993:2) underscore, lends more consideration to the social formations and the reason behind using certain linguistic constructions by groups or individuals to

craft meaningful constructions in the process of interaction. CDA basically forms a trichotomy of significant connection between language, on one hand, and its relation to power, ideology, and dominance, on the other hand. Suitably, without the notions of power and ideology, CDA is neither feasible nor desirable in critical practices (Wodak, 2001: 2). So far so good, CDA, in this way, lends a helping hand in unmasking the hidden ideologies played by speakers. In doing so, CDA opens an eye on language and another eye on society to get a comprehensive view of language use. In this respect, it is of great importance to consider poetry in terms of CDA, especially when concepts such as ideology, identity, and ethnicity are elevated.

### 2. 2 Ideology, Identity, and Ethnicity: A tripartite Analysis

In CDA, three perspectives can be elevated, Wodak and Ludwig (1999: 12-13) highlight. On the top, discourse, increasingly, covers power and ideology. Then, discourse is always historical as it is, in one way or another, connected to other communicative events that take place at a particular period of time. Conclusively, interpretation is the core of any approach to CDA and, in this sense, analysts should trust their background knowledge and information anymore. It logically follows that for the same communicative event or the same discourse, several readings are proposed.

Ideology is a central concept in CDA, as Rahimi and Sahragard (1968: 11) assure. The one who shoots the first fire of ideology in CDA is Karl Marx (1962) in order to trace culture, political, economic, and even more idiosyncratic depictions such as identity and the reflection of self (ibid.:12). Ideology, then, is a system of ideas, views, and ways of keeping an eye on all issues in life. On their part, Bloor and Bloor (2007: 10), view that ideology can be manifested by a set of "beliefs and attitudes" which are partaken by individuals belonging to certain group.

Fairclough (2012: 15) puts forward his principle concerning ideology. Thus he (ibid) hypothesises that whenever a discourse takes part in maintaining and strengthening power and domination, it is ideological. Outstandingly, people carry or are being carried by various types of discourse embracing cultural, religious, political, social, or literary discourses. In this sense, all and every discourse is absorbed by ideology.

As far as identity, is concerned, at first glance, identity does not seem to be indulged in CDA. Nevertheless, CDA is considerably linked to answer how and why identity as well as societal knowledge is reflected in language in certain construction rather than another.

Ethnicity, as Labov (1966: 351-352) asserts, occupy a critical position in social structure as it has to be located at the heart of linguistic investigations particularly in a society of ethnic groups. Discussing the bond between the outcome of ethnicity and the centrality of language, Fought (2006: 4) observes that ethnicity is a "socially constructed category" that plays a decisive job in language variations.

#### 2. 3 A Word on the Theme of Half-Caste

Half-caste, according to Verkuyten (2005: 170), is social a term used for a class of people of "mixed race or ethnicity". This poem is a crafted blending of critical themes that highlight essential issues and real experiences for people. Basically, cultural identity and ethnicity are the major themes of the poem. Its themes are multifaceted and complicated as it mingles the themes of derogatory, violence, insulting, grief, and quite

conversely a sense of fun and humour. Then, this poem looks at daily activities from unexpected standpoint. By means of accessible and poetic language, Agard conveys his critical theme with a demand to respect his audience.

## 2. 4 John Agard: The Researcher's-Eye View

John Agard is a famous British poet. He was born in 1949 in British Guiana. He is an Afro-Guyanese poet. He won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2012. His poetry frequently mixes poetic effectiveness with acute social observations (Wheeler, 2011: 195). He is one of the pioneers of the contemporary British poetry. A profound reading of Agard'd poetry makes feel you the energetic power and intensive force of his words to deal with social crises. He is not only a poet, but also an indefatigable performer of his poem on the stage so that he is a social actor of his words. Thus, his potent words are coupled with actions and reactions. He is pioneer of bringing new themes to the British poetry. So, his courage and talented poetic ability encourage him to take the first step toward talking themes like identity and ethnicity in British poetry which was not explicitly expressed.

## III. The Method and Model of Analysis

## 3. 1 The Analytical Map: A Bird's-eye view

CDA is a flexible analytical framework as it does not offer a prefabricated or ready-made approach of discourse analysis, rather it widens the area so that each study can be studied via theoretical analysis which are amalgamated with social issues. This amalgamation permits the analyst to pick which discourse strategy and social structure to scrutinise and which techniques of research can be adopted in the analysis (van Dijk, 2001: 98). In an objective manner, a model is developed in this section to analyse the data under investigation in line with the aims and hypotheses of the present study. This section, consequently, sets forth a brief account of the description of the analytical framework of the data at hand and its social implications. Intrinsically, the developed model in the present study counts on Fairclough's (2010) model of textual analysis and social practice, in addition to some observations suggested by the researchers.

The developed model is divided in terms of an analytical map which moves in three directions. The first direction is mainly concserbed with the stucyure of the poem which its chains and ropes. The second direction basically takes part in the textual analysis as reflected in the figures of speech including metaphor, pun, imagery, satire. The storybook map takes two directions. The first direction, on the one hand, is manifested by means of Hymes (1974) SPEAKING model to show the contextual factors or the social context of the storybook. The second direction, on the other hand, is the story chains which are divided in terms of four phases, viz., the titling phase, opening phase, main phase, and closing phase.

#### 3. 2 Half-Caste: A Social Context

Poems, in general, do not come into sight out of nowhere. However, they are deeply rooted in their conversational context. Through the eyes of SPEAKING model, Table (1) below illuminates the relevant contextual factors more clearly which are fruitful in this study to outline the social setting on which linguistic items can operate in this poem.

Table (1): Contextual Factors of "Half-Caste"

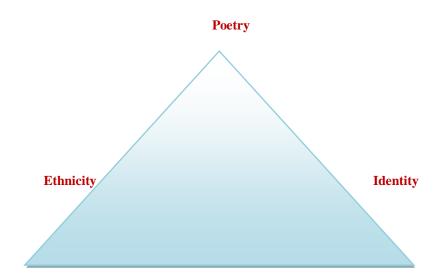
(Following Hymes' 1974 Model)

<b>Contextual Factors</b>	
	Half-Caste
	Time (When): "Half-Caste" is a 2005 poem.
	Place (Where): "Half-Caste" is contextualized in England.
Setting	John Agard is an Afro-Guyanese poet. He was born in Guyana in 1949 and moved to England in 1977.
	Occasion (Why): "Half-Caste" is given its birth to investigate the use of the racist label "half-caste," to refer to those people of mixed race.
Participants	John Agard himself.
Ends	"Half-Caste" is an attempt to motivate people to assert their identities against those who would bring them down.
	The poem is manifested through chains, i.e., stanzas and ropes, i.e. figures of speech.
Act Sequence	
Key	A mixture of funny, angry, serious, and sarcastic manner.
Instrumentalities	Poetic structure.
	The poem is abided by social norms and practices embracing identity and ideology.
Norms	
Genre	Poetry

#### 3. 3 Three Interlinked Strands for the Model of CDA

In the present study, three practical and elementary strands for the analysis of the data at hand are identified. These three strands are the y-final words: poetry, identity, and ethnicity. As the figure indicates, these three analytic strands are evidently interrelated and balancing. Moreover, poetry is positioned in the

centre of the figure for the sake of keeping in mind the fact that the planned center of attention of the analysis in present study, and therefore the common focus of these strands. Within the chains of texts and events in the data, the present study is paying attention in the exacting identities and social relations which the poet tries to establish in his poetry. The analytical triangle is best illustrated in the following suggested figure:



"Half-Caste" can be a typical example that centers on three pillars which are the language of the poet, his identity, and his identity. Centered on the top, as shown in the figure above, poetry culture, race, and ethnicity can sometimes reveal a the dual identity of the poets, his ethnic group, or his race relatedness. Looking at each of pillar, on its part, enlightens the significance of how meaning is generated, confirmed, or even challenged. The figure above gives an idea about the dynamic relationship between the three stands that are interacting in the analytical practices.

## 3. 4 The Structure of the Model

A deep dive on the progressiveness of the poem under inspection serves to reveal its talented structure. Its structure is apparently obvious at first sight. Yet, on a closer look, it turns out to be interestingly perplexed. This perplexity can be justified by the amalgamation of linguistic expressions and the extralinguistic factors, i.e. social factors, that can be utilised to foresee the occurrence of specific varieties of language behaviour out of which the critical discourse analysis comes to the forefront.

The present study puts forward the view that when a poem is taken to be critically analysed, it is preferable to map it out in terms of three dimensions which are the structure, the textual analysis, and the social practice. The structure of the poem is denoted by means of investigating the number and the order of stanzas which form the chains and ropes of the poem in a neat way. The textual analysis, as its name suggests, is conducted by means of those effective figures of speech that convey the poet's message more clearly and efficiently. Furthermore, the social practice is highlighted via ideology, identity, and ethnicity. On that account, the suggested framework may seem to be satisfactory for the data at hand. So far so good, this framework takes all the available and relevant aspects of analysis at its disposal into consideration.

By virtue of what has just been demonstrated, a model of critical discourse analysis is planned in the study at hand to analyse the data under scrutiny and it is sketched noticeably in Figure (2). This model is

mainly suitable for literary data, particularly, poetry. It is pertinent to note here that colours are indicative in this figure with a view to distinction and ease of reference. Consequently, the following keys are presented:

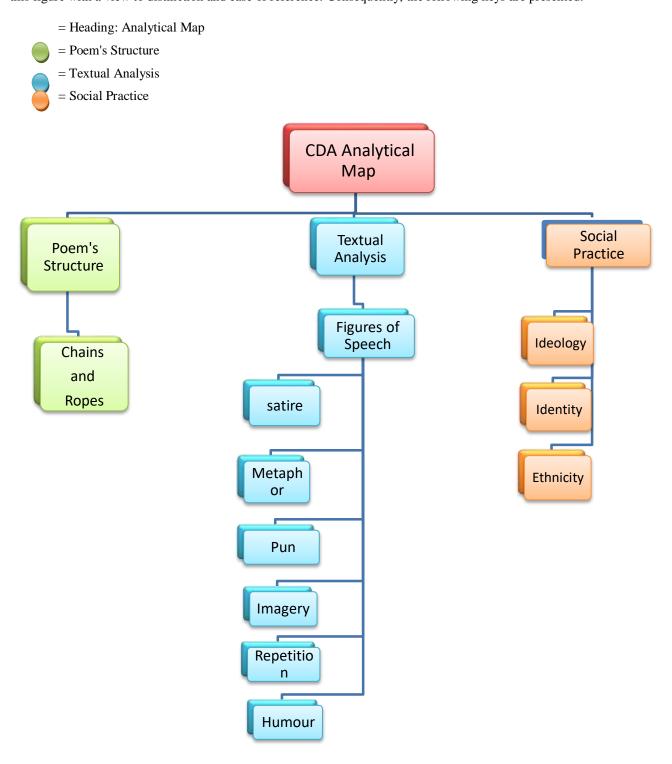


Figure (2): A CDA Model of Poetry

# IV. Data Analysis

#### 4. 1 Data Collection

The data of the present study is an influential modern poem "Half-Caste" by John Agard as cited in an official website (See Website Source of the Data). The poem is found in the form of PDF file. It is downloaded and analysed on the ground of the model developed in section three for this purpose. Consequently, the focal focus rests on illustrating how the critical discourse analysis is attained and on providing the findings of this analysis.

#### 4. 2 Data Analysis

Data analysis is carried out via the developed model introduced in section three and outlined in Figure (2) based on the exact sequencing of the model. It is worth pointing out here that the map of the analysis is graded by means of English capital letters throughout the analysis on behalf of easiness and clarity.

As far as the structure of the poem is concerned, the poem "Half-Caste" is built on chains and ropes. The chains are the stanzas, whereas as the ropes are figures of speech used in the poem. A close look on the structure of the poem at hand reveals that a kind balance between reasonableness and effectiveness is highly achieved. The poem is composed of four stanzas which vary, to some extent, in terms of their length. Nevertheless, a sort of symmetry is crafted since the first stanza and the last stanza both contain only three lines. Quite the opposite, the second stanza and third stanza are both somewhat lengthy. This symmetrical construction between the opening and the closing of the poem reflects Agard's introduction versus farewell respectively. Conclusively, the argument in the poem is built smoothly, i.e. step by step.

To convey the themes and the message of his poem, Agard is armed with all the forceful devices to defend his critical standpoint. This poem is written in 2005 and was resonated at that time. It generally looks at people's thoughts and use of the term "half-layer" to attack other people of two identities. The poem explores a range of issues affecting the identity of the mixed black race in the United Kingdom. The poem was written in the first person to reflect the poet's personal challenges. Attacking identity, from Agard's viewpoint, is not only because of the lack of a physical place instead, this belonging to a multi-dimensional place.

From, the very beginning of the poem, Agard prefers to untangle the core theme of his poem. With this aim in mind, he launches with a tercet "Excuse me, I'm half-caste". Agard launches his poetic adventure by sarcastically apologising for being half-caste. He says "Excuse me standing on one leg I'm half-caste". His apology is not really sincere. Rather, it is a satire. In spite of the fact that Agardt starts his poem by apologising for being half-caste, he intends quietly the opposite.

Agard uses a chain of metaphoric expressions to clarify the meaning of "half-caste". The use of extended metaphor accomplishes two aims. First, it underestimates the negativity of being mixed race. Second, it affirms the ridiculousness of the label "half-caste" to human beings. Agard uses metaphor of painting and mixing colours by wondering whether the artist Picasso creates a "half-caste canvas" if he mixes red and green: "Yu mean when Picasso mix red an green is a half-caste canvas"

Another interesting metaphor is accompanied with the classical musician Tchaikovsky. Again, Agard wonders whether the musician creates a "half-caste symphony" when he plays both black and white keys of a piano. Both metaphors exceedingly lead to the silliness of criticising one's identity or ethnicity.

The reason is that it is not rational to refer to painting or music as being "half" of anything. Nevertheless, Agard highlights that being "mixed" is exceptionally esteemed in the chemistry of colours, the theory of painting, art, and music. He also extremely uses critical humour when he says "in dat case england weather nearly always half-caste" and such a humour gives the ideology at hand more outstanding impact.

With the aid of pun, Agard matches the identity of "half-caste" to a cloudy weather by means of punning on a sky when it is called "overcast". Agard notes that if this weather is "half-caste" then the "England weather" is notably cloudy as well as rainy: "Nearly always half-caste". This view underlines the absurdity of relying on such labels to describe music, art, or the natural world.

Behind the term "half-caste", there is an imagery which depicts a person who lacks a complete identity. Agard tries to accentuate the racist thinking beyond the label "half-caste". This imagery is recurrent throughout the whole poem and it is emphasised one step further when Agard says "I half-caste human being Cast half-a-shadow".

Agard uses short lines such as "Excuse me", "Explain yuself", and "Wha u mean". Almost no punctuation is utilised to notify the confrontational nature of his message about identity and ethnicity. Indeed, the lack of punctuation, in this regard, lends a hand to the poem to move so quickly. Agard, here, wants to pour out his feelings at his readers to make them feel the emotions when someone critiscing them and attacking their identify all of a sudden only to force them to leave a particular place or activity.

One Caribbean phrase is used in the poem which is "ah rass" and it is rude word to reflect the angriness and aggressive of people who attack his identity and ethnicity.

The phrase "I half-caste human being" demonstrates that Agard feels that he is insulted by the label "half-caste". His phrase makes the readers hear the tone of challenging, or more even seriously the tone of threatening as when he says "Explain yuself wha yu mean when yu say half-caste".

He repeats some phrases such as "Explain yuself", "half-caste", "Wha yu mean", and "de whole of" to forcefully elevate his message. Most importantly, these phrases are Caribbean which are used by Agard to boast his Caribbean heritage, or perhaps they just come naturally because of the linguistic effect of his childhood in Guyana.

Needless to say, ideology, identity, and ethnicity have forced themselves very obviously on the theme of this poem. Significantly, Agard uses first person pronouns and direct speech, a case in point is "I" and "yu" alongside many commands, for instance "Explain yuself". Such use assists Agard to spot his ideas and reflection in a frank way and to make the poem calls into questions and be confrontational to some extent.

Remarkably, the language of Agard in this poem, is clearly a mixture of both Caribbean dialect and formal British English. Agard uses the Caribbean dialect as in "Ah lookin at yu wid de keen half of mih eye" and then he makes use of the Standard English as in "Consequently when I dream I dream half-a-dream". This dialect shift is very powerful to show the fact that Agard has a mixed heritage of both Caribbean and English. In this regard, the poet's language is the only and the most powerful means to show the amalgamation of Agard identity.

4. 3 Analytic Discussion

The analysis shows that it is significant to consider the poem at hand "Half-Caste" in terms of various

tendencies. In other words, a poem must be analysed its terms of its structural scheme, its textual

constructions, and its social implications. Hence, it is of considerable importance to analyse the poem not

merely by its linguistic constructions, but also by its social context. This finding, accordingly, answers the first

question, fulfills the first aim, and verifies the first hypothesis which states "The structure of the analytical

framework of poetry is mapped in terms of three dimensions: the structure of the poem, the textual analysis,

and the social practice from a critical discourse perspective".

The analysis also demonstrates that the dialect used by the poet can significantly reflect his identity.

Along the same lines, this finding gives an answer to the second question, achieves its aim, and validates its

hypothesis that reads "Agard manipulates his language to show the fluidity of identity by means of dialect

hybridity in his poem "Half-Caste".

As it has fruitfully proven in the analysis, Agard reflects his identity throughout his poem. This view,

consequently, can answer the third question, fulfill the third aim, and to vindicate the third hypothesis that

states "By adhering to certain strategies, Agard reflects the offensiveness and stupidity of ethnic and

derogatory labels".

Various figures of speech can be used to express the poet's message as shown in the analysis. This

finding is consistent with the fourth hypothesis, its question, and its aim since it reads that "Satire, metaphor,

pun, imagery, and repetition are the main obvious figurative uses of language that are exploited by Agard to

reflect his ideologies".

As an attempt to resonate the voice of identity resistance, Agard writes such a sort of poetry. This

view supports the fifth hypothesis that states "By dint of his refusal to comply with being half-caste, Agard's

poetic discourse has given its voice of identity resistance".

Consequently, the sixth hypothesis which says "Agard champions his language as the measure of

ethnicity to highlight his mixed race heritage" is also vindicated. As a final point, the analysis justifies that

Agard's poetry has given its depth and breadth of cultural diversity in terms of his mixed style of standard,

non-standard, or dialectical use of language. In this way, the seventh hypothesis is validated.

V. Conclusions

In accord with the findings arrived at by the critical discourse analysis of the data under scrutiny,

several conclusions are presented in line with the aims and hypotheses of the present study. Despite that, some

other significant conclusions are mentioned here due to their convenience:

1. The poem "Half-Caste", for better understanding, is structured in terms of a map, chains, and

ropes to provide an analytical framework to analyse literary works from the angle of critical discourse analysis.

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2. Linguistically speaking, the analysis is critically mapped in terms of three dimensions which

are the structure of the poem, the textual analysis, and the social practice. Each dimension is fulfilled by means

of certain relevant patterns.

3. The poem's structure, as its name suggests, is mainly concerned with the stanzas that tie up

the corners of the poem to reach its final formal form.

**4.** Under the umbrella of the analytic framework of critical discourse analysis, all and only the

possible figures of speech are covered to reflect the effectiveness of the model of analysis.

5. Socially speaking, ideology, identity, and ethnicity shape the social practice of the critical

discourse analysis.

**6.** All linguistic and social aspects must come to the limelight for a better understanding and a

comprehensive analysis of poetry.

7. Agard successfully fight against ethnicity to confirm his identity. He wants his readers to be

aware that "half-caste" is a unsatisfactory and depreciating label. He wants people to look at each other as a

whole, and not just at their skin colours or other limited social categories. In fact, Agard is over-reacting to the

label "half-caste" to reflect its offensiveness.

8. Ideologically speaking, Agard uses all the linguistic resources at his disposal to berate those

people who suffer from narrow-mindedness because they attack others for no reason except their multicultural

identity. Hence, Agard celebrates his multi-faceted identity since everyone is a valuable individual in himself.

9. As it is critically analysed, "Half-Caste" illustrates how Agard contributes to the ideological

and social crisis of identity and ethnicity in his poetry by making a balance of reasonableness and

effectiveness.

10. As far as the developed CDA model of poetry is concerned, it has proved its workability and

comprehensiveness as a successful instrument used to critically examine poems in their social actual contexts.

Thus, the model of the present study can be applicable for the analysis other poems of this sort.

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