

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

B.1 Theoretical Framework

B.1.1 Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction

The background of Jacques Derrida's thinking on deconstruction is multifaceted, intertwining his philosophical inquiries with broader contexts in literature, justice, language, and identity. At its core, deconstruction challenges traditional notions of fixed meanings and identities, positing that texts (and by extension, meanings) are inexorably linked to their contextual underpinnings, which can never be entirely disentangled from the frameworks that construct them (Sahlan et al., 2024). Derrida's work reflects a deep engagement with philosophical traditions, particularly through a critique of metaphysics and the binary oppositions that have historically shaped Western thought. He seeks to unearth how language constructs and limits meaning, advocating methods that reveal the nuances and contradictions inherent within texts. In the field of agrarian law, for instance, Derrida's insights emphasize that legal texts do not possess stable meanings; instead, their interpretations fluctuate based on broader socio-legal contexts, thereby exposing contradictions such as the tension between state law and customary law (Sahlan et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Derrida's influence extends into the realm of literary criticism and cultural studies, prompting scholars to reassess how narratives can be constructed or deconstructed. This is evident in studies that apply

deconstruction to Islamic texts, where traditional interpretations are challenged to reveal alternative understandings that transcend established meanings (Fajriyaturohmah & Labib, 2023). These applications illustrate the potential for deconstruction to serve as a tool for intellectual rigor, allowing scholars to critique hegemonic narratives and highlight marginalized voices (Yoon et al., 2019). Moreover, the applicability of deconstructive theory spans various disciplines, including fashion and architecture, further cementing its versatility.

The concept of "deconstruction" has become a lens through which cultural artifacts are analyzed, revealing how they are shaped by—and contribute to—cultural dialogues across periods and genres (Loscialpo, 2011). In essence, Derrida's deconstruction can be viewed as a radical critique of the underlying structures that support traditional thought, promoting a dynamic understanding of meaning that remains open to reinterpretation in light of changing contexts. This perspective rejects the notion of monolithic truths and encourages an exploration of the spaces where meaning is fluid and contested (Barron, 2020; Kuby & Fontanella-Nothom, 2018)

To understand how these ideas function conceptually, it is essential to examine three core pillars of Derrida's deconstruction—différance, trace, and binary opposition—which are central to dismantling the mechanics of language and meaning. The concepts of différance, trace, and binary opposition are foundational elements in Jacques Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, each playing a unique role in his critique of language and meaning. Différance is a term

coined by Derrida to illustrate that meanings are perpetually deferred through an endless series of differences. In this context, meaning is not fixed; rather, it exists in a state of flux where the interpretation of words relies on their relationship to other words within a linguistic framework.

This interplay creates a scenario where each word is defined not by a singular, stable meaning but by its differences from other words. In practical applications, poststructural theory effectively deconstructs binary oppositions, demonstrating how meaning is relationally dependent rather than inherent. As subjects navigate these differences, they engage in a process that interrogates traditional interpretations, revealing how social constructs evolve over time (Ilmi, 2021). The concept of trace further complicates the notion of meaning by asserting that every concept carries traces of other meanings within it. Derrida posited that no word or concept exists in isolation; instead, each is inextricably linked to a network of meanings that precede and influence its interpretation (Teddy, 2019; Kruger, 2004).

This interconnectedness generates a richness to texts that must be acknowledged, as every term calls forth the absent meanings that contribute to its presence. For instance, in the context of translation, engaging with traces enriches the understanding of how meanings can shift across languages and cultural contexts, capturing the dynamism inherent in textual interpretation (Kruger, 2004). Finally, the analysis of binary opposition reveals the hierarchical, yet unstable, structures that undergird language and meaning. Derrida contends

that these oppositions—such as male/female, good/evil, and presence/absence—often privilege one term over the other while undermining the latter's significance. This mechanism reinforces dominant ideologies and obscures the complexity of the relationships among the terms involved (Martín et al., 2018; Pangesti et al., 2022).

The dismantling of these binaries allows for a more nuanced understanding of identities and cultural narratives, initiating a process that prompts scholars and readers alike to question dominant meanings and embrace multiplicity instead (Teddy, 2019). In summary, Derrida's concepts of *différance*, trace, and binary opposition work in tandem to challenge and deconstruct conventional understandings of language and meaning. They invite a rethinking of how we interpret texts, illuminate the fluidity of meaning, and expose the hidden hierarchies present within language.

B.1.2 Binary Opposition

In the context of this study, the concept of binary opposition plays a crucial role in examining how meaning and power are constructed and destabilized within the film. The film *Oppenheimer* presents a dominant binary between Oppenheimer as the scientist and the U.S. forces as a representation of institutional and military power. This binary, however, is not simply a narrative structure; it reflects deeper ideological formations that privilege one term—typically the authoritative state—over the other, the morally conflicted individual.

Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction critically engages with such binary oppositions by revealing their hierarchical nature and internal contradictions. In structuralist thought, binary oppositions are treated as stable systems through which meaning is generated (Saussure, 1983). However, Derrida argues that these binaries are always asymmetrical: one term is culturally and discursively privileged, while the other is marginalized or suppressed (Derrida, 1976). In the film, the U.S. forces represent order, control, and national interest, whereas Oppenheimer embodies doubt, ethical reflection, and individual conscience.

Deconstruction demonstrates that such binaries are not self-sustaining. The dominant term (e.g., U.S. forces) can only assert its authority by referencing and incorporating elements of the subordinate term (e.g., the scientist), thus making the subordinated term a necessary "trace" within the dominant one. As Derrida (1981) explains, trace refers to the residual presence of the excluded term that continues to haunt the apparent stability of the preferred one. This interdependency leads to what Derrida calls *différance*—the perpetual deferral and displacement of meaning, preventing any fixed or closed interpretation (Derrida, 1982). For instance, the authority of the U.S. forces in *Oppenheimer* is portrayed as dependent on scientific expertise to justify its military actions. The state must appeal to the moral legitimacy and intellectual credibility of the scientist to validate its political decisions. Thus, while the scientist appears to be in a subordinate position, his presence is essential for the coherence of the dominant narrative. This instability of the binary reveals how hierarchical structures are

embedded in language and narrative structure—not through coercive force, but through the privileging and marginalization of meaning.

B.1.3 Instability of Binary Opposition

In the context of Derridean theory, which posits that binary oppositions are fundamentally unstable, the concept of *différance* becomes central to understanding how meaning is constructed and sustained. *Différance* captures two crucial notions: the idea that meaning is created through contrast with other terms and that it is perpetually deferred, preventing any final or fixed determination of meaning (Turner, 2016). This concept resonates deeply within the narrative of the film “Oppenheimer,” where the identity of the term “scientist” is continually defined in juxtaposition to “military.” Notably, the significance of both terms shifts based on the surrounding narrative and sociopolitical context, illustrating the fluidity of categorical definitions in the shadow of historical events (Faux, 2023).

Moreover, Derrida’s idea of trace further complicates the binary distinctions by advocating that each concept inherently contains the essence of its opposite. In “Oppenheimer,” as the military exerts dominance over scientific decision-making, its legitimacy is paradoxically grounded in scientific innovation and achievement. Conversely, the scientific ethos that drives the character's work is also embedded with military ambition, painting a complex portrait of interdependence that destabilizes the purity of these categories. This deconstructive approach highlights how the film critiques not just the specific moral and ethical dilemmas associated with nuclear weaponry, but also the

broader implications of how knowledge and power dynamics interact within militarized contexts.

Extending this analysis, the film's representation of the scientific attempt to set in opposition against military objectives can be viewed as a manifestation of cultural commodification, where knowledge itself becomes entangled in broader socio-political narratives of power and justification inherent in wartime. Furthermore, the film conveys the post-WWII anxieties surrounding technology and ethics, similarly echoed in scholarly discussions of Oppenheimer's legacy, which question the moral responsibilities of scientists with their inventions (Abbas, 2023; Faux, 2023; Knoblauch, 2021). Thus, through a Derridean lens, "Oppenheimer" not only interrogates the ethical ramifications of scientific pursuits but also exemplifies how knowledge and power are interwoven in a delicate web of dependency, reflecting the complexities of human ambition and societal progress.

B.1.4 Hierarchical Structure within Binary Opposition

While binary oppositions exhibit inherent instability, they frequently exist within a hierarchical framework that confers narrative or cultural primacy to one term over the other. Jacques Derrida describes this phenomenon as a "violent hierarchy," wherein one side is privileged, systematically subordinating its counterpart through the processes of exclusion and marginalization (Abbas, 2023; Turner, 2016). In the film "Oppenheimer," this narrative tendency is particularly pronounced, favoring the military's objectives over the ideals espoused by

scientists. The portrayal of scientific endeavors is often ancillary to military goals, framing science primarily as a tool for achieving wartime success rather than as an independent pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment (Abbas, 2023; Faux, 2023).

However, this hierarchical structure is ultimately fragile. The military's dependence on scientific expertise highlights the indispensable role of the scientist, thus complicating the perceived dominance of military narratives. The narrative suggests that military efficacy fundamentally relies on scientific advancements, exposing the error in viewing science merely as a subordinate means to an end. This interdependency sheds light on the limitations of the military's authority and prestige, illustrating how the subordinated term—the scientist—retains a critical and integral position within the overarching hierarchy (Faux, 2023). The narrative's stability is constantly undermined by the essential contributions of science, suggesting that the military's dominance is not absolute but rather precarious and contingent upon the very knowledge it seeks to control (Knoblauch, 2021).

Furthermore, recent discourse in military strategy emphasizes the importance of integrating scientific perspectives into military objectives, reinforcing the idea that knowledge and power are co-constructed rather than purely hierarchical (Havrylenko et al., 2024; Henckes et al., 2018). For instance, the historical significance of scientific contributions to military capabilities reflects a broader understanding of how knowledge production operates at the intersection of power and authority, compelling scholars to reconsider the dynamics within

which these binaries exist (Moyano, 2018). Ultimately, “Oppenheimer” serves not only as a critique of militarized science but also as an exploration of the complex interactions between knowledge and power, revealing how hierarchical structures can be challenged and deconstructed through the lens of interdependence and necessity (Iganej & Vafa, 2024).

B.2 Review of Related Research

The story of scientists as both good and bad is an old one, and it continues to resurface in popular media, highlighting how society has always been divided on the issue of scientific discovery and its profound implications. These two conflicting sides are strikingly depicted in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, which appears as the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer as an ingenious scientist and a morally heavyweight, being the creator of a devastating genocide. In this section, the work will shed some light on the way such complexities of scientists are discussed in film and literature in order to give a critical ground to carry out a deconstructive analysis of the character of Oppenheimer. The use of deconstructive theory in the analysis of films has become increasingly popular in recent years, and it has provided a novel angle for looking at narrative structures and character description. In the article, *Deconstruction in Film Analyses: Poststructuralism, Derrida and Cinema* (AKER, 2022) explains how deconstruction can confront the institutional interpretations of cinema. Using the ideas of différance, phonocentrism, and logocentrism developed by Derrida, Aker demonstrates instability and plurality in the meanings of cinematic texts. This

study affirms the fact that movies are not a unified entity, but it is composed of a series of contradictions, which creates an open possibility of dialogue between the movie, the audience, and the greater cultures they are a part of.

Similarly, Widyahening and Wardhani (2021) do so in their research, entitled “Deconstruction of Maleficent Characters in the Movie Titled Maleficent.” They question the conventional dualistic good-evil dichotomy, boiling Maleficent down to a multifaceted individual who is perfectly capable of love and protection. The redefinition of the archetype of female villains through reframing her actions and bringing in the symbols, such as the symbol of her freedom and identity wings, the study redefines the character, portraying its weaknesses and openness to change (Widyahening & Wardhani, 2021). Batubara, Nasution, and Pratama apply the theory of deconstruction in *Zootopia* and distinguish that the characters are not fixed but develop over the plot. Their analysis can also be used to show how characters such as Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde do not present a fixed character that is easier to plan and realize, but rather the operation of responding to an issue. This follows post-structuralist criticism of the strict narrative forms, which helps to comprehend narrative more intensely in modern movies (Batubara et al., 2020).

Tiwahyupriadi and Ayuningtyas present the case study of Indonesian horror films and pay attention to why such a repetitive aspect as urban legends plays an important role in cultural revitalization. What their research also points out is how the traditional narrations are adapted to the modern film language on the one hand, and the progression of critical thinking and maintenance of cultural

identity in the minds of the younger generation on the other. This solution highlights the possibility of the film to re-represent the folklore and address the modern-day social problems (Tiwahyupriadi & Ayuningtyas, 2020). In *Forget Mammy!: Deconstructing the Mammy stereotype in Blaxploitation films*, the role of deconstructing the Mammy stereotype in Blaxploitation films. Blaxploitation *Deconstruction of the Classic Movie Tropes with Black Feminism, Black Power and the Bad Voodoo Mamas.*" A redefinition of the black woman as strong and complex with this kind of research is a criticism of the past through a reconstruction of the cinema to support the Black identity in culture, illustrating how cinema can change attitudes towards such stereotypes as race and gender (Alexander, 2019).

Finally, the scholars Anggraeni, Agustine, and Damayanti deconstruct a film, namely, "I am Not Stupid" by Jack Neo, focusing also on the importance of the entire approach to parenting that considers both cognitive and emotional development. Their results cut across the traditional assumptions regarding education, where a more integrated approach towards the development of children should be preferred. With the help of three chosen scenes, the researchers disassemble those expectations of society that are imposed on the character Liu Kok Pin and demonstrate the great consequences of this pressure on students, both psychologically and emotionally. The paper also reveals the possibility of using deconstruction to understand deeper epistemological assumptions in film narrative and eventually reveals the need to know more about family life and the complications of schooling. As a whole, all these studies are

sufficient to show the applicability of deconstruction to the study of films, disclose the ambiguities of stories and characterizations on-screen, and encourage further discussions of cultures and ideologies within (Anggraeni et al., 2019).

