

# Hegemony Culture Seen In Kate Elizabeth Russell's My Dark Vanessa

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## Hegemony Culture Seen In Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*

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**Abstract.** This study analyzes the hegemony reflected in Kate Elizabeth Russell's novel *My Dark Vanessa*. It reveals how hegemonic power is manifested through the manipulation of Vanessa Wye, a young student who becomes a victim of oppression, by Jacob Strane, an influential teacher. The research aims to achieve two subjectives: to identify and describe the dominant and subordinate roles of the characters in *My Dark Vanessa*. The scope of this study is limited to cultural hegemony and focuses on a textual analysis of the characters' interactions in the novel. The importance of this research is to shed light on the complexities of power and student victimization in education. A descriptive qualitative research design is used, involving the gathering and analyzing of data that are not numerical but describe data related to the research topic. The study employs the cultural hegemony, underscores how hegemony affects her ability to maintain social connections, navigate personal relationships, and understand her self concept in coping with her trauma. This research contributes to the discourse on mental health and power representation in literature and demonstrates the value of a sociological approach in unpacking complex character relationships. It provides a foundation for future studies on the intersection of power and literary analysis, enriching both academic and practical perspectives on hegemony. The findings reveal that her subordination is triggered by both psychological manipulation and societal norms, such as the romanticization of teacher and student relationships. Her experiences highlight the debilitating nature of hegemonic control.

**Keywords:** *Domination, Hegemony, Power, Roles, Subordination.*

### INTRODUCTION

According to Johnsen (2020), hegemony is power gained by a dominant group through its ability to integrate special interests into the so called general interest. This allows the dominant group to earn the voluntary consent of those under its influence. The goal of hegemony is to achieve and maintain control through internalizing a sense of powerlessness in the influenced. Such legitimized beliefs make the self interest of the dominant group invisible, while the resulting norms are perceived as being in the common interest. However, these values are rarely shared fairly, as the ability to maintain power relies heavily on the legitimacy of existing norms and ideologies. According to Hamilton and Suominen (2023), hegemony develops through recognizing and integrating ideas from other discourses to strengthen its influence. However, hegemony is never

completely strong or permanent, as there are always challenges and influences from different ideas.

According to Ahriani (2023), the dominance of hegemonic groups is often seen through the dominant culture that emerges when certain groups control people's views. This allows them to control various aspects of life, such economic, political, educational, and social. With subtle manipulation, hegemony makes individuals unconsciously accept power as natural and inevitable, thus strengthening the legitimacy of existing social structures. The same issue can also be found in Kate Elizabeth Russell's novel *My Dark Vanessa*. The novel tells the story of Vanessa Wye, a 15-year-old girl who is involved in a secret relationship with her English teacher, Jacob Strane, who is 42 years old. Strane manipulates her into believing that their relationship is romantic, although it is violent. As she grows older, her understanding of Strane's past actions changes, prompting her to reassess her relationship with Strane. Strane utilizes his position to manipulate Vanessa, his student, into an illicit relationship. He uses manipulative narratives to maintain his power and protect his reputation, even persuading her to lie to preserve his image. In the past, she internalized Strane's narrative and perceived their relationship as love. However, her experience of trauma and internalized conflict led to potential resistance. She begins to question the norms that Strane's behavior, indicating a breakdown in the hegemonic system.

In this study, there are the problem formulations that researchers want to discuss in this study, as follows: (1) How does the dominance play role in *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell's? and (2) How does the subordinate play roles in *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell's? After identifying the problem, the purpose of this study is to analyze the dominant and subordinate roles in Kate Elizabeth Russell's novel "*My Dark Vanessa*."

Theoretically, this study contributes to the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies by illustrating the application of Gramsci's ideas in analyzing cultural hegemony in literary works. Practically, this study enhances the understanding of how hegemonic power works and emphasizes the importance of questioning and challenging systems of oppression in literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Salamah's paper entitled "Hegemony in Carol Lynch William's Work, *The Chosen One*" (2021) from Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University in Malang highlights the issue of hegemony in religious societies. This analysis reveals that the dominant group exercises hegemony by imposing its power in politics and gaining approval in civil society over lower groups. The similarity between this study and this thesis lies in the use of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to examine the interaction between powerful and marginalized groups, with a focus on the ways in which power and control are exercised and maintained. Different in terms of the attention given. "Hegemony in Carol Lynch Williams' *The Chosen One*" describes the dynamics of a religious community by investigating the exercise of power manifested through norms and expectations related to religion. In addition, this influential group consists of religious leaders who enforce values through coercion and consent. On the other hand, the article "Hegemony Culture Seen in Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*" discusses the concept of hegemony in education by examining the relationship between authorities, such as teachers, and students. In this context, powerful educational institutions, especially teachers, act as the dominant group that controls students.

Sari entitled “The Portrayal of Hegemony As Seen in The New World Movie (2005) by Terence Malick” from Sultan Agung Islamic University Semarang, examines hegemony and its influence seen in the film. The study highlights that the hegemonic influence shown in the movie is oppression that appears in the form of physical violence and a sense of powerlessness. The findings of this study indicate that the domination exercised by the Indian group over the British group is done by two methods, namely by gaining consent as well as through coercive actions. This thesis is in line with the aforementioned research, as both utilize Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to explore power and the methods used to express domination and subordination in different narratives. The differences lie in the media used for analysis, the context of hegemony, and the dominant group. “The Portrayal of Hegemony as Seen in The New World movie” uses film as the object of analysis, using visual and narrative elements to analyze hegemony while “Hegemony in Kate Elizabeth Russell’s My Dark Vanessa” analyzes a novel through a textual approach to understand how hegemony works in the storyline.

According to Teo and Vasu (2023), hegemony refers to an individual or groups attempt to maintain or control their power by more subtle methods, rather than using violence. Gramsci emphasized that hegemony is defined as the control of a social group through intellectual and moral direction. Sardar (2024) argues that in order to maintain their power, powerful groups must actively gain the support of subordinate groups. According to Mafrukhi (2021), the appeal of hegemony has a nature that does not intimidate, but slowly traps its victims, so that they feel helpless in its grip. Beliefs that align with the values of a particular group are referred to as ideologies. Domination produces an imbalance of power, which triggers resistance from those under its influence. According to Thomas (2013), the term hegemony introduced by Antonio Gramsci is a complex idea that has an important impact in analyzing power and domination in society. Gramsci emphasized that hegemony is not defined as physical power or control through violence, but also involves cultural and ideological control that contributes to creating agreement among various social groups.

According to Zandra (2024), Gramsci’s theory emphasizes the importance of cultural and ideological domination in maintaining the continuity of the power structure. The concept of hegemony put forward by Gramsci relates to the way the ruling class influences the culture, morals and ideology of the groups under it. This control is achieved not only through coercion, but also through the consent of the controlled, thus making the existing social structure seem natural and inevitable. The ruling class propagates their perspectives through institutions such as education, media, and religion, which shape society norms and values to suit their interests. The dominant class relies on the intelligentsia to influence the public conversation and set their values as the standard. Leadership in culture plays an important role in shaping and reinforcing values and beliefs in society. Through the flow of cultural information, the ruling class can shape society views and further strengthen its position of power.

## **METHOD**

In this study, which uses qualitative methods, Mohajan (2018) reveals that qualitative research is an approach in the social sciences that focuses on how individuals interpret and understand their experiences, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of social reality. Qualitative research is applied because the information obtained comes from the characters in My Dark Vanessa. The method applied in this research is descriptive research, which aims to explain and describe the hegemony of the characters

in the novel *My Dark Vanessa*. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a focus on the theory of hegemony that exists in the novel "*My Dark Vanessa*" by Kate Elizabeth Russell, and analyzes the characters involved in the context of the hegemony.

In this study, researchers applied literary sociology to analyze the characters of Jacob Strane and Vanessa Wye in the novel *My Dark Vanessa*. According to Slyvie Meiliana (2019) in her work entitled "Sociology of Literature", literary sociology refers to the concepts and theories applied to analyze the characters of Jacob Strane and Vanessa Wye. Literary sociology is applied in this study because researchers use Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which highlights the hegemony of Jacob Strane and Vanessa Wye's characters in the story who are affected by conditions and situations.

The data used comes from the novel *My Dark Vanessa*, which describes Jacob Strane's domination of Vanessa Wye. The book was released in 2020 and has a total of 382 pages. Supporting sources are taken from references such as books, journals, articles, and websites that discuss issues of hegemony.

In this study, data collection was conducted through three stages. The first stage involved repeated readings of *My Dark Vanessa* with an emphasis on selecting key passages and interactions that presented the hegemonic power exerted by Jacob Strane over Vanessa Wye in a subordinate position. The second stage involved collecting data from the novel, setting criteria and paraphrasing to find evidence of manipulation, control, ideological persuasion and resistance. The final stage was to categorize the data that had been collected.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The Dominant Role

Jacob Strane as a 42 year old teacher, plays a dominant role in *My Dark Vanessa*. He uses his position of authority in the school to control and influence others. His ability to set boundaries in the interactions between teachers and students emphasizes the potential dangers that may arise from an imbalance of power in education, where people in authority can use their position for personal gain.

He described that consent can sometimes be coerced or manipulated. The control in their relationship is not only physical, but also psychological. He builds trust in her subordinates that their relationship is unique, despite the coercion. This points to a social issue, where the dominant culture often overlooks the experiences of victims, especially young women who are affected. He charm and influence made a respected figure and role model for students and the school institution. He made him a natural leader. He skillfully shaped how others perceived him. He presents himself as a committed teacher, which allows him to escape scrutiny and act without having to face the consequences. Strength lies in his ability to shape views. He crafts stories about what does and influences others to make sense of their own experiences.

His primary motivation is to maintain control over her feelings and thoughts, and maintain control over herself. As a teacher, he utilized his authority to shape her perceptions of love, relationships and self identity. By instilling the belief that their relationship was unique and special, he managed to keep the person affected, despite the passing years. He demonstrates an understanding of power, uses it to justify his behavior, and creates an environment that makes her feel indebted while blurring the line between love and exploitation. He seeks to achieve hegemony which is also closely related to the

social structure and gender norms in society. His manipulations are supported by cultural narratives that often normalize and even glorify relationships between older men and younger women. This creates an image of men as figures of authority and wisdom, while rendering women's voices and freedoms inconsequential. Society's support of male dominance allows it to operate without fear of consequences, which in turn reinforces their hegemonic control. Jacob Strane's motivation to hegemonize is illustrated in the quote below:

*I laugh as I answer, relieved he's alive, that he's calling. "Are you ok? Strane?" He exhales a heavy sigh. "I guess you saw." "Yeah," I say. He says the school is opening an investigation and he's bracing himself for the worst. He assumes they'll force him to resign. He doubts he'll make it through the school year, maybe not even to Christmas break. (Russell, 2020: 2-3).*

He said that the school was conducting investigations of other former students there, and he was preparing for the worst. She suspected that they would force her to resign, and doubted whether she could make it to the end of the school year, perhaps not until Christmas. As a teacher, he utilizes influence and emotional manipulation to maintain dominance over her young and impressionable student. Over time, the student begins to realize that their relationship is actually unhealthy. He changes the situation to appear innocent, hoping to gain attention and assert her loyalty. He starts by influencing her emotions.

*He looks from the road to me, his eyebrows cocked in alarm. "I'm never getting married," I say. "Same as you. Remember?" "You don't really want that." "Yes, I do." "You don't," he says flatly, his teacher voice taking over. "I don't want to talk about this anymore." "Don't be upset." "I'm not." "You are. Look at you. You're crying." "Please stop talking." He says, "Vanessa, when you look back, you'll remember me as someone who loved you, just one of many. I guarantee your life is going to be so much bigger than me." (Russell, 2020: 160-161).*

He tries to change the victim's mindset about their future by conveying that he is trying to make their separation seem natural, not as a result of problems in their relationship. This was his approach to control, where he as the perpetrator never really took responsibility for what he did. He interprets the relationship as an experience, even though it still has meaning for the victim.

As explained earlier, one important aspect of Strane's hegemony is the mastery of consent. He utilizes psychological strategies to convince Vanessa that their relationship is consensual and even romantic, despite the considerable power imbalance. Such manipulation illustrates the dominant culture's frequent disregard for Vanessa's views, viewing their experiences as false or pretend. His demand for a relationship based on mutual understanding diminishes individual autonomy, demonstrating how dominant narratives can influence views of consent. Strane's hegemonic influence on her was strong and long-lasting. She has a different view of relationships, sexuality and self identity. Despite the trauma, she struggled to accept the fact that she was a victim, as she had

internalized the story that their relationship was based on love and consent. Although many years have passed since the incident, she still struggles with the reality of the relationship. This shows that the cultural hegemony him was subjected to not only left wounds from the past, but also continues to influence her adult life. In addition, the impact of this hegemony on her is increasingly evident. The emotional trauma left by her previous relationship had a profound effect on her identity and sense of self-worth. Her attempts to reclaim control of her life after her relationship with the man emphasize the social influences that shaped her experience.

Jacob Strane's role as teacher and mentor gives him strong power over Vanessa. The power imbalance in their relationship is evident through his manipulation, where the difference between guidance and exploitation becomes difficult to distinguish. His character illustrates the archetype of a predatory authority figure who capitalizes on a young girl's weakness, thus reinforcing the social norms that allow such relationships to exist under the guise of intellectual and emotional interaction. His ability to play the role of protector and guide, while keeping a watchful eye on Vanessa, reflects the complexities that exist within the world of education. His actions indicate a wider acceptance of male authority figures in the culture.

#### 4.2 The Subordinate Role

Vanessa Wye, a 15 year old teenager, plays the role of a subordinate. She is incapable of realizing that she is being oppressed, despite being trapped in a very unbalanced relationship. She does not immediately realize or acknowledge that she is a victim of violence. She believed that the relationship she had was a reflection of true love and intellectualism. She believed that it was a form of respect in the relationship, not a form of exploitation. She adopts a view of love and desire that is heavily influenced by societal pressures.

She rejected the notion that she was a victim, even though her friend clearly revealed that she had been abused. When her friend offered to help her release Strane, she chose to refuse the help. For her, reporting Strane felt like self-betrayal, as she believed that their relationship was something special, not a form of abuse. She was reluctant to admit that she was a victim, as it would disrupt the narrative she was building about Strane and their relationship. This is explained in the following statement:

*I didn't know something she did not about music or movies or the general ways the world worked. "I had a feeling," she says. "You had a feeling what?" "You don't have to feel bad. It's not your fault." "What isn't fault?" "I know he's abusing you," she says. "You're wrong." "Vanessa, listen," she says. "We can get him fired. My dad is on the board of trustees this year. If I tell him about this, Strane is out." "Why do you care so much about this?" I ask. "It has nothing to do with you." "He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be allowed near us. He's a predator." I laugh out loud at the word predator. "Give me a break." (Russell, 2020: 164-167).*

Her association with her teacher reflects power in a system of hegemony. His power gives him the opportunity to control her. Her limited freedom and experience of isolation reinforced her subordinate position. The absence of support from peers and adults reinforces a sense of powerlessness. She shows moments of resistance despite

being in a subordinate position. This journey is characterized by her striving to gain control. She seeks to rewrite her experiences and confront the issues that have shaped her identity. Here, resistance reflects the complexity of her position in the context of hegemony. To illustrate, a quote shows how such men are able to make the right choices, emphasizing the insidious nature in the relationship. This illustrates the troubling exaltation of male power in relationships.

*I press the heels of my hands into my thighs. "I can't lose the thing I've held onto for so long, you know?" My face twists up from the pain of pushing it out. "I just really need it to be a love story, you know?" I really, really need it to be that." "I know," she says. "Because if it isn't a love story, then what is it"? I look to her glassy eyes, her face of wide open empathy. "It's my life," I say. "This has been my whole life." (Russell, 2020: 326-327).*

As a result, she strives to fight for her freedom. She is caught in a conflict between feeling empowered and victimized, which reflects the conflicting messages she receives from her social environment. She has a view that her relationship with him mirrors the relationship between a teacher and a student. She is conflicted by her loss of identity, which is caused by the lack of support from her peers and the adults around her. This conflict alienated her. She felt that her experiences were not true or worthy of attention.

## CONCLUSION

In the novel *My Dark Vanessa*, a complicated relationship develops between Vanessa Wye and her teacher, Jacob Strane is heavily influenced by factors of cultural hegemony that manifest through manipulation, control, and emotional dependence. Jacob Strane's character reflects a predatory authority figure who exploits the weakness of a young girl, while reinforcing the social norms that allow such relationships to take place on the grounds of love and nurture. His actions form an outcome of love and consent, even though what actually happens is the result of exploitation and injustice in power. His dominance is seen in his ability to shape the view of their relationship, convincing women that their attachment is something special and different. The story is underpinned by cultural norms that often regard relationships between older men and younger women as natural, so Vanessa's opinions and freedoms are given little weight. His emotional manipulation makes Vanessa feel indebted, making it difficult for her to realize that their relationship is actually unhealthy. This illustrates the impact of domineering influence. As she begins to doubt their relationship and show signs of defiance, he uses intimidation and fear of social stigma to take control of the situation. He not only damages her reputation, but also makes her a scapegoat for the possible consequences. The situation is made worse by the attitude of the educational institution, as shown by Mrs. Giles, who prefers to hide the problem and maintain the institution's image rather than protect the victims. Therefore, the school as an institution reinforces the dominance of the powerful and suppresses the voices of the victims.

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