

## SOCIAL CRITICISM OF JAPANESE WORK CULTURE IN THE LYRICS OF BLACK OR WHITE BY KANNONZAKA DOPPO

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**Abstract.** This research is a social criticism of the company system for treating salarymen. The purpose of the research is to find social criticism of the reality of corporate treatment of salarymen in Japan contained in the lyrics of the song Black or White, sung by Kannonzaka Doppo. The method used in this research is the descriptive analysis method to describe the social reality that occurs in the salaryman. The data source used in this research is the lyrics of the song Black or White by Kannonzaka Doppo. The research approach uses Roland Barthes' theory to find the second and third meanings in the song lyrics. The data collection techniques used in this research are documentation, literature study, and internet searching. The data analysis technique is descriptive with a qualitative approach that includes the steps of categorization and interpretation of denotation, connotation, and myth. The results of the research on the lyrics of the song Black or White show social criticism of the reality that occurs to salarymen. (1) criticism of the imbalance between excessive working hours and unequal salaries; (2) social criticism of the abuse of power as a forerunner of harassment; and (3) social criticism of the psychological impact that occurs on workers.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, salaryman, Kannonzaka Doppo, social criticism, work culture.

### RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Social criticism is a form of conveying new ideas that is used to evaluate old ideas in a social context. A social system's ability to function can be determined by a public distribution method (Oksinata, 2010:73). Literature is one of the various forms through which social criticism can be communicated. According to Sapardi Djoko Damono (1984:57), literature works have become an excuse for authors to express their dissatisfaction about many aspects of social life. Roland Barthes was a French literary critic, essayist, critic, philosopher, and semiotician who pioneered a new approach to analyzing literature narrative structures related to life and societal issues. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and semiotician, established the concepts that Barthes later developed. Saussure had in mind the formation and organization of sentences that would determine meaning in a complex way. Barthes continued Saussure's thought. However, the interaction between experienced and text is more emphasized with the consent experienced and expected by the user. The idea is known as the Order of Signification, which contains denotation and connotation, which makes Barthes' thinking different from Saussure's (Chandler, 1994). In the definition of the word, denotative and connotative come together into one. While connotative is used to evoke an exaggerated sense of something (Wahyuningsih, 2020:63).

Quoting from Mythologies (1972), Barthes discusses how the bourgeoisie reinforces their values. Barthes also invented semiology, the study of signs that is useful in this interrogation. Barthes explains that these myths of bourgeois culture are second-level signs of meanings. The workings of myth are explained by Barthes, which then shows the difference between myth and language :

1. Signifier	2. Signified
3. Denotative Sign	
4. Connotative Signifier	5. Connotative Signified
6. Connotative Sign	

**Table 1:** *Signifier-Signified* according to Roland Barthes's Myth

The explanation of the table shows that Barthes' ideas are based on Saussure's ideas, about Signifier - Signified, it can be seen the fact that denotative sign (3) is a combination of a signifier (1) and signified (2). However, denotative sign may also serve as connotative signifier (4). According to Barthes, the connotative sign not merely has one more meaning, but it also includes both parts of the denotative sign (Vera, 2014:27).

Using the myth concept, Roland Barthes' myth theory can be used to examine hidden meanings to understand the social and cultural dynamics that exist in literary works. In social criticism, Roland Barthes' myth theory is used to analyze how social norms in society can be seen through representations in various media, one of which is in song lyrics. Therefore, Barthes' theoretical approach can be used to examine and discover the second and third meanings in this analysis.

Related to the social criticism movement in Japanese literature, in 2017 King Records created a rap-style multimedia project called Hypnosis Microphone. Contains 6 groups of 3 members each, one of which is Kannonzaka Doppo. Black or White was released on March 25, 2020 on Hypnosis Microphone's second album. Black or White contains criticism of how the Japanese corporate system treats salaried employees. Japanese companies tend to treat salaried employees by requiring them to be committed to their job and company. Salaried employees are required to work hard, often working beyond normal working hours without pay, and are expected to maintain loyalty to the company. This is considered a form of loyalty to superiors and companies (Wahyuningsih, 2012:182). The approach in this research uses Roland Barthes' myth theory which is used to find the second and third meanings in the lyrics of the song Black or White. Roland Barthes' myth theory will explain what is in the lyrics of the song Black or White, and can represent social problems that arise in the work environment of Japanese companies.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Similar research on social criticism has been conducted by several other researchers. They are Widyantoro (2018) and Saifudin & Noviana (2023).

Widyantoro (2018) did research titled Kritik Sosial di Wilayah Kawasaki-ku dalam Lirik Lagu Hip-hop Berjudul "Liberty" oleh band BAD HOP. This research discusses social criticism in the Kawasaki-ku area, social criticism carried out is aimed at discussing problems in the form of poverty, Yakuza, single mothers and drugs that have occurred for a long time and have not received serious attention from the Japanese government. The similarities between our research and that of

Widyantoro include the utilization of song lyrics as data sources, as well as criticism intended at criticizing Japan's present social system. However, Widyantoro's research discusses a social problem that exists in the Kawasaki-ku area, while our research discusses how the Japanese corporate system treats salarymen. Syaifudin and Noviana (2023) did research titled Analisis Semiotologi Roland Barthes pada Teks Lirik Lagu Nanatsu no Ko Karya Noguchi Ujo. The purpose of this study was to look into the meaning and appreciation of the lyrics to Noguchi Ujo's children's song *Nanatsu no Ko*. Using Roland Barthes' text semiology technique. The research findings took the form of criticism aimed at the author's dissatisfaction with modernization in Japan strategy, which stripped their original identity as a Japanese national. Syaifudin and Noviana used the lexia method in this study, and the data were investigated using five narrative codes: hermeneutic, proaretic, semiotic, symbolic, and reference. Meanwhile, our research focuses only on connotations and denotations to better grasp Kannonzaka Doppo's social criticism in the song Black or White.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research used the descriptive analytic method to describe the social environment that exist in the salaryman. The lyrics of the song Black or White by Kannonzaka Doppo served as the data source for this research. The research approach uses Roland Barthes' theory to identify the second and third meanings in the song lyrics. This study's data collection methods included documentation, literature review, and internet searching. The data analysis technique is descriptive using a qualitative approach that includes processes for categorizing and interpreting denotation, connotation, and myth.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Classification of lyrics based on social issues

1. Lines 1 through 12 are about the criticism of the imbalance between excessive working hours and unequal salaries.
2. Lines 13 through 32 are about the social criticism of the abuse of power as a forerunner of harassment.
3. Lines 33 through 39 are about social criticism of the psychological impact that occurs on workers.

### 1. Criticism of the imbalance between excessive working hours and unequal salaries

Signifier	Signified	
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<p>眠らず働く令和日本勤務先デカイ企業。I'm ジャパニーズサラリーマン吐く言葉かなりリアル。取引先は神様です「誠に申し訳ありません。御社の成長と発展に貢献させるクソッタレ」。老後の資金そう言うが給料さえ仮想通貨。人生の勉強代は経費で落とせねえクソが。バブルゆとり生え抜き窓際叩き上げから親のコネ。ストレス地獄を生き残れ摩天楼の上で踊れ。6時起床7時出社8時朝礼社訓の唱和。規則正しく行く挨拶「一生懸命頑張ります」。長時間労働無い終電辿り着いた我が人生。今日も仕事が終わらない我が社は BLACK OR WHITE?</p> <p>Working without sleep, Reiwa Japan. My place of employment; a huge corporation. I'm a Japanese salaryman. Spitting words that are fairly real. The customer is always God. I beg you for your forgiveness. Contribute to your own company's growth and development too, asshole. Retirement funds, or something like that. Even cryptocurrency can be a salary these days. The education fee of my generation is. Impossible to pay off; bullshit. Bubble, yutori, a useless professional. Only rising through the ranks due to family connections. Survive throughout stressful hell. To dance atop the skyscraper. Getting up at 6, working at 7. At 8 all together recite the company's motto. Greetings made without error "I'll keep doing my best!". Labouring for long hours, missing the last train. Is this the life that I strived to reach. These days work never seems to end. Is this company black or white?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer are treated like God: Customer satisfaction is paramount in Japanese companies. Customers are regarded with great honor.</li> <li>• Bubble: Japan's peak economic era in 1980-1990.</li> <li>• Education expenses incurred are not equivalent to salaries: Inequality of spending and earning due to an unstable economy.</li> <li>• <i>Yutori</i>: It refers to the generation from 1980 to the end of 1990. Negative views attached to this generation, for example, are often called spoiled, weak, have no initiative, and so on.</li> <li>• Useless professional: A person who has been working for a long time, but is actually not beneficial to the company at all.</li> <li>• Hell: A depiction of the state of workers who will always carry the burden of the company and themselves.</li> <li>• Last train: Excessively long working hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
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Denotative Sign / Connotative Signifier	Connotative Signified	
<p>Salaryman have a grueling routine, going to and from work when the sun hasn't risen/isn't risen anymore with unequal pay. Facing a lot of complaints by always groveling before customers as a demand and facing a lot of stereotypes from the older generation of weak and spoiled workers makes workers experience excessive stress.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Going to and from work when the sun is not yet/has not appeared: Excessive working hours, violating applicable regulations and employee rights.</li> <li>• Humble yourself: Customer priority number one.</li> <li>• Salary inequality: Violation of employee rights by not paying for hours worked.</li> <li>• Stereotyping as weak and spoiled: Social discrimination among workers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p>Connotative Sign</p>		
<p>Excessive working hours, pay inequality, and social discrimination among workers within a company lead to excessive stress.</p>		

Based on the application of the sign above, the resulting mythical meaning is that the Japanese company system requires salarymen to work overtime with unequal wages. Japanese companies began recruiting white-collar workers or commonly referred to as *Y-shatsu* known as salaryman. Salarymen are faced with long work weeks and behavioral doctrines that make them rigid. A good salaryman will sacrifice himself for the benefit of the company, exposing himself to strict company norms, such as *saabisu zangyou*, unpaid overtime as a form of devotion to the company. Doppo emphasizes that the work system can have serious repercussions for workers. The salaries they receive are not enough to fulfill their daily needs. However, Japan's economy was at its peak from 1980-1990, often referred as the bubble era. The bubble in the lyrics of the song represents the workers who have experienced that era. The same goes for *yutori*, who represent the generation born between the late 1980s-2000s. Both bubble-era and *yutori* workers are trying to survive on salaries that are not equal to the needs that must be accommodated every month. Japanese socio-cultural concepts also make it difficult for employees to refuse, as it can negatively impact one's appearance as a reliable worker. In Japan, around 52.3% of salaryman are dissatisfied with their current work condition. In 2021, this remain lower than 54.2% in 2020. Within the recent decade, the number of workers feeling stressed and highly insecure in their work environment peaked in 2012 at nearly 61% (Statista Research Department, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/623230/japan-stress-at-work/> (accessed on 20th March, 2024)).

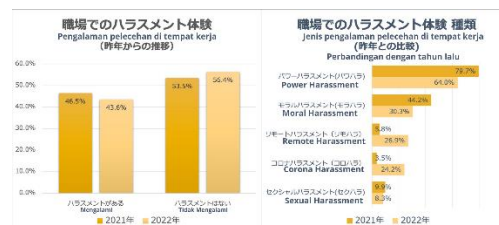
## 2. Social criticism of the abuse of power as a forerunner of harassment

Signifier	Signified
<p>黒か白の社会で灰になるまで WORKING。グレーゾーン探して働き生きてく WORKAHOLIC TOKYO CITY 走るドブネズミ。Yシャツとリクルート燃えるまでデイスるSHOW。働きたくないぜ 働きたくないぜ 働きたくないぜ。やっぱり働きます。セクハラパワハラリークしてやるくそ上司。自己責任だろテメエのネクタイと気を引き締めろ。先輩上司に気配りを後輩部下に気遣いを。SNSの裏アカでちょっぴり愚痴っても良いだろ。この会社は奴隷市場さあ皆証言しな。なのに定時で上がる途端冷たい視線は何なんだ？社畜の証が社員証まあ良いよまた一步。近づくと爆発するぜ働き方改革。給料明細引く税金酒が精神安定剤？景気が良くても悪くても業務内容は関係ない。とうとう限界点迎える労働生産性。ならば変えるしかないね俺の人生 BLACK OR WHITE? 黒か白の社会で灰になるまで WORKING。グレーゾーン探して働き生きてく WORKAHOLIC TOKYO CITY 走るドブネズミ。Yシャツとリクルート燃えるまでデイスるSHOW。働きたくないぜ BLACK OR WHITE。働きたくないぜ BLACK OR WHITE。</p> <p>Sexual harassment, power imbalance, leaking complaints away from your shit boss. Keeping your tie and mind straight is your own goddamn responsibility, isn't it? Give your superiors respect and be concerned for your subordinates. SNS accounts kept hidden make it easier to complain a little, don't you agree? This society is a slave market; people as its testimony. And yet as soon as we walk in on time, how many gazes become unfeeling? My ID card is the sign of a corporate drone, always stepping in time with praise. A bomb approaching explosion, my work-life will now be reformed! Are the taxes deducted from my paycheck supposed to relax me? Work continues regardless of whether or not the economy is doing well. At last the breaking point: labour productivity finally met. If that's the case I have no choice but to change my existence into black or white. In a black and white society. Until we turn to ashes, still working. Searching for a grey zone. Labouring</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power harassment: An injustice committed by a person in a higher position to a person in a lower position. This is where other types of harassment arise.</li> <li>• Keeping the tie neat: Maintaining appearance.</li> <li>• The company is a slave market: The perception of companies that treat workers as slaves by utilizing them unfairly.</li> <li>• Employee ID as a sign: A worker's identity hook tied to a company that has taken away the freedom to control their own lives.</li> <li>• Black and white: The state of society.</li> <li>• The gray area: The state of people who live only to work like rats running on a wheel.</li> </ul>

just to live. Workaholic Tokyo City. A rat running on a wheel. Y-shirt and recruit. Dissing to get fired up, show. I don't want to work, black or white, black or white.	
Denotative Sign / Connotative Signifier	Connotative Signified
Power harassment is the main cause of the various harassments that occur within the company. Salarymen are required to maintain a perfect appearance in accordance with company regulations, leading to the perception that workers are slaves who have been deprived of their freedom to control their own lives. In the midst of a general society, most workers set themselves in a gray area, where they only work to fulfill their lives, like rats running on a wheel.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slaves: Representation of the poor living conditions of workers</li> <li>• Company: The place where the highest harassment was experienced by some workers</li> <li>• Harassment: A social issue</li> <li>• Rats running on wheels: The monotonous life of workers who have to do what they can to make ends meet.</li> </ul>
Connotative Sign	
A representation of the poor conditions of salarymen in a company caused by the power harassment that results in the emergence of several other problems such as the deprivation of freedom and the emergence of several forms of harassment.	

Based on the application of the above sign, the meaning of the resultant myth is power abuse, which leads to the creation of several other problems such as restriction of liberty and the emergence of other forms of harassment.

Salarymen face significant challenges like as sexual harassment (セクハラ) and power harassment (パワハラ). In Japan's highly competitive and hierarchical work culture, power imbalances between superiors and subordinates are common, leading to power abuse and different forms of harassment.



**Figure 1** Percentage of experiences and types of harassment in Japan

The number of reported cases of power harassment in several companies led the Japanese government to create a new law specifically for reporting any acts of harassment called the Powa-Hara (Power Harassment) Prevention Act which was passed on June 5, 2019. However, the number of consultations regarding harassment is on the rise. Of these, the number of consultations for "bullying and harassment" has been the highest, reaching 80,000 in 2020. By 2021, 46.5% had reported that they experienced harassment and by 2022 it had decreased by 2.9% to 43.6%. The number of power harassment in 2021 reached a very high percentage of 79.7%. Moral harassment cases came in second, accounting for 44.2% of the total. Sexual harassment was the most common, accounting for 9.9%,

followed by distant harassment (5.8%), and Corona harassment (3.5%). In 2022, power harassment decreased to 64.0%, moral harassment to 30.3%, with a significant increase in remote harassment incidents at 26.9%, corona harassment at 24.2%, and sexual harassment at 8.3% (Prtimes, 2022. <https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000091.000013597.html> (accessed on 20th March, 2024)). Doppo symbolizes the conditions faced by salarymen in this lyric, where the majority of problems within the firm arise as a result of abuse of authority backed by the organization's hierarchical system. It is this hierarchical system that makes someone who holds a higher position arbitrary and harasses the salaryman. Direct supervisors were the most common offenders of workplace harassment, accounting for 68.2%, with seniors coming in second at 30.3% (Prtimes, 2022. <https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000091.000013597.html> (accessed on 20th March 2024)). Salaryman who are harassed may not receive a response from the firm. Doppo unleashed his criticism in the song as a frustration experienced; existing emotions cannot be poured out in public since it will harm his personal image in front of coworkers and superiors, as expressed in the song's lyrics above.

### 3. Social criticism of the psychological impact that occurs on workers

Signifier	Signified
<p>降格あるの? ボーナス出すの? ノルマ上がると気分下がるよ。働きたくないでも生きれない働かないと生きてはいけない。中指立てるの簡単だけど愚痴るよりもそう行動しろよ。それが俺たち日本のサラリーマンタフに静かに「白黒つけます」。黒か白の社会で灰になるまで <b>WORKING</b>。グレイゾーン探して働き生きてく <b>WORKAHOLIC TOKYO CITY</b>走るドブネズミ。Yシャツとリクルート燃えるまでディスる <b>SHOW</b></p> <p>Will I get demoted? Will there be a bonus? I feel ill when seeing my quota go up. I can't live if I don't work, but I can't work when I'm dead. It's really easy for us to raise our middle fingers when we become irritated, but it's better conduct to just hold it all in and mutter complaints. That's why of all us Japanese salarymen quietly tough it out with "black or white, choose". In a black and white society. Until we turn to ash, working. Searching for a grey zone. Labouring just to live. Workaholic Tokyo City. A rat running on a wheel. Y-shirt and recruit. Dissing to get fired up, show.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty between demotion or bonus: Anxiety and uncertainty experienced by workers regarding the consequences of being called out by superiors.</li> <li>• Feeling sick: A worker's emotional discomfort that is psychologically related.</li> <li>• Mumbling to myself: Hiding things inside rather than letting out emotions.</li> </ul>
Denotative Sign / Connotative Signifier	Connotative Signified
<p>The anxiety and uncertainty experienced by workers regarding the consequences of being summoned by superiors leads to workers' emotional discomfort related to psychology, which makes workers often hold back.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological: Relates to the mental health of salarymen.</li> <li>• Holding back: Unable to release emotions due to pressure.</li> </ul>
Connotative Sign	



Salaryman's emotional discomfort makes their mental health decline due to the pressure received.

Based on the application of the signs above, the resulting mythical meaning is that the emotional discomfort of workers makes workers' mental health decline due to the pressure received.

According to graphs compiled by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare based on National Police Agency data, the number of suicides in Japan in 2022 was 21,881, up from the previous year. The suicide rate per 100,000 persons climbed from 0.8% to 17.5%. In 2020, health issues accounted for 49% of suicides. However, because health concerns encompass both mental and physical disorders, they cannot be differentiated. Financial related problems accounted for 17%, and domestic problems 10%. Most suicide victims are male, with 70% of suicides committed by men aged 20-44 years (Handbook of Health and Welfare Statistics, 2018) is also tolerated in Japan because of the concept of *amae*, or the desire to rely on and be accepted by others. Fitting in and being acknowledged makes Japanese workers feel like they belong (Ozawa-De Silva, 2010).

Doppo's lyrics show how badly Japanese companies abuse salarymen. The treatment experienced in the first and second points leads to the third point, which represents the salaryman's ultimate feelings. There is no comfort zone in the Japanese work system, salarymen will continue to work like a mouse spinning in a wheel, representing how things will continue as usual even under harsh conditions. This has resulted in many impacts, one of which is the increase in the percentage of workers who commit *karoshi* due to the pressure exerted by the company.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis results, it is possible to figure out that the lyrics of the song *Black or White* highlight social issues that are specific to Japanese corporations, such as the disparity between work and pay, power abuse, which is the primary cause of harassment, and the declining mental health of employees as a result of stress.

The following are the primary societal criticisms that Japanese office workers face, as depicted in the song *Black or White*, and are based on myths about the social issues that affect them:

1. Criticism of The Imbalance Between Excessive Working Hours and Unequal Salaries.  
Salarymen criticized how companies arbitrarily told workers to work even though their working hours were already over, unfortunately workers who did overtime for the sake of the company were not given additional salaries according to the overtime hours assigned. The work should be done in accordance with the regulations issued by the government.
2. Social Criticism of The Abuse of Power as A Forerunner of Harassment.  
The extremely competitive and hierarchical work culture in Japan frequently results in power imbalances between superiors and subordinates, which pave the way for harassment and other forms of abuse of authority. The corporation has not reacted to some of the complaints made by employees who have experienced harassment.
3. Social Criticism of The Psychological Impact That Occurs on Workers.

Salaryman typically hold back because of psychologically associated emotional discomfort brought on by their fear and uncertainty about the actions they must take when called by their superiors. The company's intense pressure leads to a number of effects, one of which is an increase in the proportion of employees who commit *karoshi*.

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