

Racial Segregation in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

This paper makes a comparative analysis of racial discrimination faced by the characters in the novels, The Kite Runner and Disgrace. Both novels are based on non-western settings and the characters become the victim of racial segregation. British rulers first promoted racial injustice in the process of expanding colonialism. As a result, racism emerged as a dominant factor of oppression of the people by power holders. Authors, in both novels, have shown their characters victimized by racial domination. In Hosseini's The Kite Runner, the central character, Hassan becomes the victim of ethnic oppression as Amir and Assef dominate him and force Hassan and his father leave their home. Amir and Assef belong to Pashtuns and Hassan and his father belong to Hazaras in the Muslim community. They belong to different ethnic groups and the majority group dominates minority groups. Next, they become victims of Taliban oppression and are tortured and killed mercilessly. In Coetzee's Disgrace, the central character, David Lurie as a white professor seduces his black student, Melanie Isaac, using his predominant racial power. Next, his daughter, Lucy is raped by three black men as a byproduct of the post-apartheid era. Racial attitude has created problems in the lives of the characters as they undergo many kinds of suffering in the novels. For analyzing the novels, racism has been used as a theoretical tool to explore the problems concerning human relationships. In The Kite Runner, there is the domination of one ethnic group over another ethnic group treating them as inferior and non-human. In Disgrace, there is the domination of whites over blacks and the domination of blacks over whites. Both novels reflect that racism based on any level is a social evil caused by human relationships and it has always negative effects on society. Due to racial segregation, one group dominates another group creating social problems.

Keywords: Domination, evil, hegemony, oppression, racism, segregation

Background

The Kite Runner is written as the counterattack of Afghan society reflecting the backdrop of the transitional phase of Afghanistan. Amir and Baba are Pashtuns and Hassan and Ali are Hazaras. Rahim Khan is friend of Baba. Amir and Hassan are childhood friends. Kite flying is a popular competition in Kabul. Many boys compete

in the tournament and Amir wins the contest and Hassan struggles to catch the losing and dropping kite as a *Kite Runner*. He was trapped by hooligans and raped by Assef. Amir is the eyewitness of the event but does not help Hassan. Then, Amir accuses Hassan and they leave the house of Baba. Amir and Baba leave Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and migrate to San Francisco, America. Amir marries Soraya and Baba dies of lung cancer there. Amir returns to Afghanistan, meets Rahim and finds many social problems like poverty, starvation, ruin and scattering of old Afghan culture. The Taliban destroyed many heritages including Baba's house and shot Hassan and his wife, Farzana. Rahim Khan tells Amir about Hassan's son Sohrab who is sent to an orphanage. He also tells Amir that Hassan was his brother born by illegitimate relations between Baba and Hassan's mother. So, Hassan was his half-brother. When Amir searches for Sohrab, he meets Assef who is the Taliban leader. Ultimately, Amir takes back Sohrab to America with difficulty. In this regard, Sohail Ghafoor and Umer Farooq report that "*The Kite Runner* is paragoned with sociological and psychological issues. It contains iron barriers of sects, caste systems, class differences, and modification of culture through internal and external invasion. There is a conflict between the elite (Amir) and the subaltern (Hassan) and the conflict between nostalgia and the bitter reality" (30). The novel shows the domination of Sunni Muslims over Shi'a how Sunnis behave is reflected when Assef says to Hassan, "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, and always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood" (40). Pashtuns never take Hazaras as human beings. It shows social problems through the relations of the characters. The Pashtuns become superior and dominate Hazaras as inferior within the same ethnic group.

Disgrace is set in South Africa during the post-apartheid era. David Lurie seduces his student, Melanie Issac as a result loses his job and reputation. When Lucy is raped by a gang of rapists, the event is taken as a structural parallel to Lurie's rape of Melanie. David Lurie is reflected as totally self-absorbed in terms of his relationship with others. The novel reflects racial segregation which is still embedded in our history and the same issues are still prevalent in contemporary South Africa. To show the rebellion of the white authority and the shift in power dynamics the ramifications of post-apartheid are portrayed. The previously dominant position of whites is shattered by violence and a new power structure emerged. During the post-apartheid era, the power of the white is over and it becomes very difficult for them to cope with the new situation. In this connection, Hassan Abootalebi reports that David Lurie finds it difficult to accept new power and South Africans as rulers whom he imposed his ideas on them without giving any chance of resistance and contradiction he cannot abandon his idea of colonialism or white supremacy (77). The black people want to take revenge against whites and the rape of Lucy is regarded as counteract of blacks to

retaliate against whites. During the apartheid period, blacks were legal victims and in the post-apartheid age, the blacks avenged whites by creating both mental and physical suffering following the idea of whites, blacks oppressed whites.

Racism has become one of the pernicious problems of modern society. Studies and experiences of minority groups have shown that Western societies are racist mainly in other societies. It permeates human relations concerning race and ethnic groups not only in Europe and Western countries but all over the world. Limited civil rights have been brought but unequal relationships have not been changed yet by resistance and protest. Focusing it as a social problem, Teun A. Van Dijk says that racism is concerned with a complex societal system in which European people dominate people of other origins and the dominance takes the form of cultural, political, economic, and social hegemony (24). It can be noticed from the nature of ethnic inequalities and power relations between majority and minority groups. It can best be understood and explained in terms of the connection with cultural, political, and societal dimensions and from the perspectives of ethnic minority groups. The negative evaluation of non-western people has been perceived as differences based on appearance primarily on skin colour. In this connection, Simon Clarke reports that the concept of race evolved out of pseudo-scientific Darwinist theories that emphasize that biological and natural differences are inherent and unalterable and are associated with the idea of superiority and inferiority resulting in the hatred and persecution of those who are different as the other (38). Scientifically there are no races and they have no inherent moral and socio-cultural features. Being only social constructions, they still exist today. Both novels, *The Kite Runner* and *Disgrace* will be analyzed from the perspectives of racism to explore how it divides societies constructing homogenized groups as superior and inferior.

Statement of the problem

The novels *Disgrace* and *The Kite Runner* show racism as a social evil that has divided people into different groups. They focus that racism instigates evil practices in society. As an evil force, it divides the societies into many fractions and creates many kinds of conflicts in human circle. Instead of uniting the people from the diverse domains, it has always functioned as a factor for creating border line. Characters in both novels become the victim of racial division and face many kinds of miseries. Likewise the plot line of the novels also exposes the obnoxious aspects of racism. By showing the malpractices in both novels, racism is reflected as a factor which needs to be eliminated by collective effort. In essence, both of the novels consolidate that harmony and integration can only bring a sense of universal brotherhood and cosmopolitanism. To attain this plenum for one world and one human race, racism should be eliminated.

This article exposes these aspects by answering the following research questions:

- a. In what ways racism becomes the major factor for rupturing the integration and harmony in the societies as exposed in the novels *Disgrace* and *The Kite Runner*?
- b. How does racism create suffering for the characters in the novels *Disgrace* and *The Kite Runner*?
- c. Why does racism instigate division and upheaval in the society?

Racism as a social evil

Racism has become a global threat in this modern world and literature. We find various examples of racial discrimination. Due to this, some people are found segregated and some others are thrown out of the mainstream, changing the course of their life. It is determined by factors like physical appearance, intellectual ability, family background and culture. Emphasizing the origin of the beginning of racism, Ali Rattansi states that it was first coined in the 1930s in response to the Nazi's project to threat Aryans and to hail that Jews were a distinct race (4). It reflects that it was first used to establish the supremacy of one and to segregate others. Ultimately, it divides people into so-called superior and inferior groups and the so-called superior groups and effects like colonial conquest, slavery, massacres and segregation are created. Showing it as the outcome of society and culture, Philomena Essed says that being inherent in culture and social order, racism is created and reinforced through practices and connected with structural forces (2). Everyday practices make connections with institutions and hierarchy is created for superior groups. Reflecting on it as a global phenomenon, Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt opine that no part of this world has been out of its grip and racial ideas have a significant role in the expansion of colonialism and dominance (1). It has been used to exploit the other in any context. Mainly, in politics it has become a common concept with negative connotations. Even examining it from social, moral, and religious perspectives it is a social evil created by some groups to hold power. Any issue concerning it is significant in political, academic, and moral debate.

The idea of racism is promulgated by various social institutions and its implications can be noticed everywhere even in a civilized society. As it refers to unequal power relations in which one race of people dominates the other groups resulting in discriminatory practices. Showing the example of white domination in America, Lois Tyson says, "in order to be a racist – in order to be in a position to segregate, dominate, or persecute – one has to be in a position of power as a member of the politically dominant group" (381). The powerful group controls the power and sidelines the other group in terms of getting privileges from the government. When one group feels marginalized by institutions or the behaviour of other groups the issue becomes a matter of debate. The contradictory matter about it is that nobody observes himself/herself as racist

but their behaviour reflects. As Albert Memmi mentions that it is everywhere as the theory of the origin of species by Charles Darwin reflects as survival of the fittest (6). In this regard, it is taken as a power exercise which began with Western colonizers. Those who are in favour of it take it as natural. Taking it as a social problem concerning human relationships, Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown report, "Racism distortedly represents human beings, and the social relations human beings, specifically in terms of 'race', and this undermines attempts to create a 'race' consciousness among the victims of racism" (7). Racism is a socially constructed phenomenon that is created from human relationships as everybody wants to be superior over others as far as possible. By examining the novels, *The Kite Runner* and *Disgrace* the issues like how racism affects the characters like how some characters dominate others by holding power, how other characters suffer, and how they realize in the novels will be studied. Similarly, how the relationships of the characters is obstructed by variation in race.

Methodology

This article uses comparative analytical and explanatory methods to find similarities and differences in both novels, *Disgrace* and *The Kite Runner* in terms of racial domination. As primary sources, both novels provide information on racial segregation. They also reflect how racial discrimination has created problems in the life of the characters. Various books, scholarly journals, and articles written by various writers and critics about racism, racial discrimination, ethnic problems, mistreatment of people based on race, and the techniques applied to bring changes in such social problems have been compared, interpreted, and explored to analyze the novels from the perspective of racism. Likewise, articles and books on racism criticizing the weakness in terms of domination of inferior and minority group have also been used as methodological texts. The focus is on how racist behaviour has created the problem in societies making divisions among people. It also applies a thematic analytical approach to revisit these great works. It also compares the novels to find how characters are dominated and segregated based on race. Various articles and reviews written about the writers Hosseini and Coetzee and both novels have been considered as secondary sources to analyze how racism has created problems in human relations.

Ethnic segregation in *The Kite Runner*

The novel was set in Afghanistan during a time of political turmoil. The novel deals with the relationship between Amir, the narrator and Hassan who is his servant and illegitimate half-brother. They are childhood friends. Amir takes part in a kite contest and wins with the help of Hassan. When Hassan goes to bring the blue kite being loyal to Amir, he is rapped by Assef. Amir as the eyewitness of the event pretends as if he has not seen anything. He does not defend Hassan from the attack of Assef.

This is the domination made by superior people over inferior people. Showing the dominance of powerful groups over powerless groups, Hosseini in the novel *The Kite Runner* writes as, “I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras” (9). In the Muslim community, Pashtuns are regarded as elite groups and they dominate Hazaras as a minority. He further reports, “Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi’a” (9). Mainly Sunni are in the majority and dominate the people of their community Hazaras who are called, “mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys” (9). This kind of ill-treatment shows that powerful groups treat inferior groups as non-human. Similarly, the instances Pashtuns have mocked the appearance of Hazaras who are poisoned as slaves. Amir’s remark, “I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi’a, and nothing was ever going to change that” (25) indicates that the concept of racial discrimination and ethnicity is difficult to change which is deeply rooted in our unconscious.

The domination made by Assef and Amir over Hassan is the domination of Pashtuns over Hazaras. Again, Amir wrongly charges Hassan with stealing his watch and money to throw Hassan and his father Ali out of the house. Even he forbids his father to show love and kindness to Hassan. Then Ali and Hassan move to Hazargat. Soviet invasion of Kabul is an example of the expansion of colonialism. This caused political turmoil and the loss of many lives and property. When the Taliban have come into power, they have begun to dominate the minority groups. Taliban officers accuse Hassan of being a lying Hazara and killed him and his wife, Farzana and their son Sohrab are kept in an orphanage. In this connection, Nang Gede Rohmatullah and Riana Permatasari report that the superiority of the Pashtun is portrayed in the novel also they commit violence toward the inferior group, the Hazara and the relationship between them is negatively affected (60). The relationship between the central characters negatively moves in the novel. Amir Khan narrates to Amir about the secret relationship between Baba and Ali’s wife. The behaviour of Baba toward Ali’s wife is also an example of the domination or exploitation of the superior groups over the inferior group. Amir knows that Hassan is his half-brother. Then he decides to adopt Sohrab realizing his mistakes. As Ban Salah Shaalan says, “Amir’s journey from Kabul to America back to Kabul represents his journey from sin and guilt to redemption and good” (372). Ultimately, Amir comes to a state of realization by adopting Sohrab and encountering the attacks of the Taliban. Towards the end of the novel, the reflection of the attack on World Trade Centre of America and America’s invasion of Afghanistan are also events caused by racism.

The Kite Runner reflects that Hazaras are marginalized due to ethnic discrimination. Hassan’s rape by Assef and the mute witnessing of Amir and the assassination of Hassan by the Taliban are results of ethnic segregation. The novel portrays various

forms of violence faced by Afghan children, women and minorities. Hassan faces all kinds of violence such as physical, sexual, emotional and psychological due to being a member of an ethnic minority. The domination made by Pasthuns over the Hazaras clearly depicts how ethnic supremacy is reflected in the novel. This way, the novel shows the evil practices promoted by ethnic division among people.

Racial discrimination in *Disgrace*

As a postmodern novel set in South Africa, *Disgrace* deals with real human weaknesses like racial discrimination, rape, cruelty, and seduction. The novel reflects the South African Society during post-apartheid Africa which revolves around racial issues. The *Disgraceful* situations are mainly created by the racist and sexist attitudes of the characters. The reflection of the uncomfortable, unanswerable, and pathetic situations of the people of South Africa is to show the bad effects of inhuman activities like cruelty, violence, rape, sexual exploitation, and racial discrimination which lie in an unconscious state. Apartheid moment began in South Africa in 1948 and ended in the early 1990s. During that time many racial groups were segregated as inferior. The black people were badly tortured by whites. Marriage was prohibited among many races and racial violence is reflected in the novel. Due to such racial discrimination, people lived in different housing having different living standards. After the end of apartheid moment, the whites were in the minority and there was a shift in power dynamics. As Belachew Weldegebriel mentions whites are reflected as sticking to previous hegemony and bringing *Disgrace* on themselves and their descendants and blacks are shown as claiming their rights of equality and regaining lost identity, property, dignity, and power (111). The blacks are reflected as a victim of apartheid movement and they attack whites to avenge.

Disgrace tells the story of a fifty-two-year white professor David Lurie, who was twice divorced. From the beginning of the novel, he is guided by sexual passion. He frequently visits a prostitute named Soraya and fulfils his passion. After she leaves him, he seduces his student, Melanie who was a black girl. Taking her to his house he has sexual relations with her. Coetzee (2000) in the novel includes "He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd slippers, kisses her feet, astonished by the feeling she evokes" (25). The reason behind this is his predominant racial power. During the time of colonialism the whites used to dominate blacks in many ways and this is the reflection of his white identity. He misuses his power and dignity and creates domination by seducing an innocent girl. This can be reflected in the example of racial domination made against blacks who often treat blacks as inferior groups. Such practices were common during the time of colonialism. It is an example of an inter-racial faultline or dominance. As a novel set during the time of the post-apartheid movement, it shows another episode concerning racial injustices. Here the characters

alter three black men rap Lucy his daughter in front of David Lurie. The reflection of the multiple rapes of a white woman by black men is another expression of racial dominance as well as an inhuman world. This oppression can be taken as an example of the revenge made by blacks against whites. Similarly, they kill many dogs on that farm taking them as the symbol of whites.

The novel *Disgrace* reflects that there is racial complexity in South Africa. The encounter between the whites and the blacks has created problems in the novel. By promoting racism, David Lurie loses many things such as his job, reputation and success. The beginning sentence of the novel, “fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (Coetzee 1) indicates that he is misusing his power. By his presence, others have become victims. On the other hand, black people are also portrayed as hooligans and looters. Reflection on their distorted physiques shows that racism is an evil practice that brings division among people.

Hegemony in *The Kite Runner* and *Disgrace*

As a social evil, racism is based on physical features, ethnicity, religion, and nationality which divides homogeneous people as superior and inferior groups. Racial discrimination is made by a person or group on any basis either skin colour or economic status or family background in which people refuse to do many activities like sharing ideas and socializing. Talking about the context of America, Joe R. Feagin says, “Systemic racism encompasses a broad range of white racist dimensions: the racist ideology, attitudes, emotions, habits, actions, and institutions of whites in this society. Thus, systemic racism is far more than a matter of racial prejudice and individual bigotry. It is a material, social, and ideological reality that is well-imbedded in major U.S. institutions” (2). Even from the perspective of government, discrimination has been promoted as laws are enforced differently and unfair distribution of resources between regions. It has many facets depending on the context such as verbal, and non-verbal racism, racial violence, institutional racism, ethnicity labelling, and racial labelling. Reading various literary works of various periods the trend of racism can be found and that remains even today. In this modern world, it is shameful to segregate human beings on any basis as it is known as the transparent age guided by scientific reasoning. In Hussein’s *The Kite Runner* and Coetzee’s *Disgrace* many instances of the oppression of racism in the lives of the characters can be found.

In *The Kite Runner* Hassan and his father, Ali are oppressed by Amir and they have to leave the house of Baba. Here, they are inferior groups. Being Hazaras they are dominated by Pashtuns. This is intra-racial domination in which one Muslim dominates others. Concerning the conflicting relationship between Amir and Hassan, Di Chen writes, “Amir and Hassan were living in emotional entanglements all their

lives. They were friends but also had a master-servant relationship. They crossed racial, and religious segments of society, became each other's best friend; social status, religion and ethnicity also hinder them to become each other's best friend" (240). Even being childhood friends, they are always divided by racial issues and cannot live in harmony. Hassan is following the symbol of loyalty and Amir is following the symbol of redemption. Due to domination they become the victim of the Taliban and are murdered. This domination can also be taken as ethnicity or racial labelling. They dominate in the name of Hazaras, which is the labelling of minority groups by majority groups within a similar ethnic group. After leaving Baba's house, they move to Afghanistan where they are tortured and killed by the Taliban. This is an example of racial violence that when the Taliban came into power they tortured Hazaras. Hassan's son Sohrab is kept in an orphanage. This is also an example of racial labelling to keep an innocent child in custody after murdering his parents. The suffering faced by Hassan, Ali and Sohrab is the result of racial discrimination. If they were with Amir and Baba, they would not be the victim of the Taliban and their torture. In this regard, Clarke mentions that as a social construct, racism is concerned with the ideas of hierarchy and persecution through which people project their inner world onto others (12). As containment, race divides Pashtuns as superior and Hazaras as inferior. By following social practices Amir and Assef segregate Hassan and Ali as others. As a prejudice, racism is structural inequality which is reflected by the practices that promote inclusion and exclusion between various groups. In the novel, the Hazaras are institutionally excluded by the state.

In *Disgrace* Melanie Issacs becomes the victim of David Lurie's passion being inferior. This is racial violence in which a white violates a black. It can also be asserted as institutional violence in which the whites used to dominate the blacks and other inferior groups by expanding colonialism. Next, David Lurie's daughter Lucy is raped by three black men. This is another instance of racial violence and it can also be interpreted as the expression of the revenge of blacks over whites. The blacks became the victim of the whites a lot in the past and still today they reflect violent behaviour towards whites. This event shocks David Lurie more than Lucy. He wants to charge the case but Lucy refuses. This event strains the relationship between father and daughter. The rape of a white woman by three black men is also inter-racial domination. Here racism operates in the black men as a claim of rightful position or the act of revenge against the apartheid movement. As Pham Tran Thuy Anh says, "It can be inferred that the common serious problems of that contemporary society are inequality and power relations which can be found in *Disgrace* by Coetzee" (187). In terms of Lucy, the rape of her is depicted as rendering a revenge of previous injustice of the whites against blacks. It is also an example of a shift in power dynamics. Due to racism, many women in the novel become the victim of sexual assault. Only the case of Melanie is reported and David Lurie loses his career as a professor. The people who are in power

dominate the powerless people. Race has become the dominating factor in the novel. In both novels, racial differences have created not only division between characters but also threat. The powerful group always dominate the inferior group taking advantage of many factors. In *The Kite Runner*, the domination of Pashtuns over Hazaras and in *Disgrace* the domination of whites over blacks and the revenge of the blacks over whites resounds with what Rattansi says, “A sense of superior group position prevails: whites are “better” than blacks . . . This is a racist attitude and it permeates the society, on both the individual and institutional level, covertly and overtly” (132). Mainly, in terms of human relations, one group or individual subtly dominates the others as it lies in the human subconscious. It has become not only a tool of discriminating against people but also a weapon to exploit others. It also promotes racially oppressive practices and discriminatory social relations. David Attwell states that racial discourse is portrayed in the novel through the depiction of black-on-white rape (332). Similarly, Akram Sadat Hosseini and Esmaeil Zohdi opine that in *The Kite Runner* racism is thoroughly conspicuous and perceptible in the early parts including the dominance of Taliban over Afghanistan and the unfair behaviour of Pashtuns towards Hazaras (39). Thus, both novels portray racism is an evil product of social practices which has negative outcomes including oppression, discrimination, and imbalance in society.

Conclusion

Both novels, *The Kite Runner* and *Disgrace* are set in a non-western setting and they reflect the difficulties of the people who become the victim of racism. Mainly, westerners dominated non-westerners a lot in the past promoting racism and colonialism. Everybody is found to be guided by racism far or less or verbally and non-verbally. Racism, in fact, is a kind of discrimination and it is still emerging in this modern era of science and technology. People want to rule others and the rulers become superior in any base and dominate inferior. In both novels, characters become victims of racism and suffer a lot. In *The Kite Runner*, Hassan and Ali become victims of the domination within their Muslim groups. Amir dominates them and makes them leave Baba’s house wrongly charging them of theft. Hassan is raped by Assef. Taliban invaders torture them and kill them. Even Hassan’s son Sohrab is put in an orphanage which was run by Assef. The difficulties faced by Ali, Hassan, Farzana, and Sohrab are being of an inferior race: the Hazaras. Even within the same race people dominate others. Next, in *Disgrace*, interracial domination is explored. Here, David Lurie seduces Melanie not avoiding his apartheid power relation. He loses his job due to his passion. His daughter is raped by three blacks on her farm before him. This is the racial domination of blacks as the byproduct of the post-apartheid period. In the first novel, we find domination among Muslims as Pashtuns and Hazaras. There are some instances of colonialization. In the latter novel, we find domination between whites and blacks. It also reflects many women have become the victim of sexual exploitation.

Both novels expose the message that racism is a severe fault line which is perpetuated through various apparatus of society.

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