

# ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം

ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 33

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## **Race in Human Rights: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the textbook *Zeitgeist***

**Hamda Hanan  
Dr. Mufeeda T**

*Racism in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement was understood to be a consequence of individual prejudices and it was believed that racial stratification would stop when people stopped thinking about race. But the beginning of the Critical Race Theory in the 1970s the above argument was rejected and it was argued that race consciousness is necessary to overcome Racism. This study examines the integration of racial content in the common course paper of English for the undergraduate students in the three-year B.A. English Degree Course (2017) at Calicut University, by attempting a Critical Discourse Analysis of the module 'Human Rights' from the textbook , 'Zeitgeist'. As a course taught to undergraduate students, this paper examines three discursive devices used in the textbook that serve as a means for shaping or (re)producing ideological values (1) the ways authors create 'versions of reality' based on their choice of words and how they combine words together (2) the ways authors construct certain kinds of relationships between themselves and their readers;(3) the ways authors of textbooks draw upon and reinforce the larger systems of belief and knowledge that govern what counts as right or wrong, good or bad, and normal or abnormal in a particular society, The article thus identifies the challenges and limitations of the textbook in addressing past and present racial inequities of the world— particularly its attempt to*

*equip students with the knowledge to engage in meaningful dialogues and critical writing about racial issues that are entrenched in the majoritarian and parochial India of today.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, textbook , TESOL, Race, Constructing ideologies, Discursive devices, shaping identities/ collective memories

## **Introduction**

The textbook *Zeitgeist* selected for study in this paper is prescribed as a paper for the undergraduate students of the arts, humanities and science disciplines across the colleges under Calicut University. The paper argues that the textbook cannot be regarded as an English language textbook alone, rather it also plays a crucial role in shaping the ideological and racial understanding of a large percentage of the student population in Calicut.

Furthermore, since the publication of Pinar's essay, 'Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text' (1995), it has been argued that curriculum can no longer be regarded as a political text alone but rather must also be studied as a text through which race operates and pervades us. And hence it is essential that one understands the racial influences of the textbook on the student community. Race is a complex, dynamic and changing construct. Pinar in his essay quotes Roxana Ng to argue that, "Race, class, and gender are relations that have to do with how people define themselves and how they participate in social life. They are not mere theoretical categories." (Pinar, 1985 p.315). Thus it follows that the students' understanding of race becomes significant not merely in shaping their own identities but also of those around them as a consequence of their interactions in social life. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr, "Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of 'the White Race' or 'the Black race,' 'the Jewish race, or the Aryan race,' we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors" (Pinar, 1985 p. 317). And these "metaphors" and "misnomers" have not only resulted in massive suffering but have also been used to organize the "dominant" world. The paper demonstrates how the metaphors and misnomers have shaped a dominant racial world within the textbook as well.

There have been studies which examine racial segregation in the school curricula in Kerala but there is hardly any study which examines how race operates through the undergraduate curriculum of a university in Kerala

### **Living in ‘syllabus society’ and embracing the “textbook culture”**

“The academic field of curriculum is embedded in the national culture” argued William F Pinar in his book, *Curriculum Studies and the Politics of Educational Reform* (2005). If it is so, then it follows that the educational system of each place impinges on the social, historical and institutional settings of the place. Hence, while studying the enactment of the curriculum in the Higher Education system in Kerala, it is imperative that one understands the educational culture of the state. Due to the dearth of such studies in the context of Kerala, the paper will extend the arguments on the nation to the state albeit with limitations.

In his essay, ‘Curriculum Studies in India’ Manish Jain argues that following Robert Dotts (Jain, 2015, p. 82) India can be classified as a ‘syllabus society’, one that embraces the ‘textbook culture’. Following the argument, India is understood as nation which lays undue emphasis on the syllabus and assigns centrality to the textbook leaving little or no room for involvement and negotiation by the teachers and students. A testimony to the argument is evidenced by how the universities in Kerala have devised textbooks for undergraduate courses, a phenomenon uncommon in other universities of the state. And in such a society a study of the curriculum necessitates a study of the textbook. Arguably, a study of the textbook alone will depict how the textbooks have mediated the higher education process, be it questions on what constitutes knowledge or questions on what knowledge is most worth in the universities.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

The paper will study how race operates through the undergraduate curricula, by employing Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992) as a method to analyse the textbook titled, *Zeitgeist* (2017) of the B.A. English common course of University of Calicut.

However since the paper attempts to only analyze the racial influences of the textbook, the paper will focus on the study of the module 'Human Rights' alone.

In order to analyze the textual material collected the paper utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis as a method. The paper attempts to answer the following research questions

1. In what ways does the textbook create universal and absolute racial identities ?
2. The ways authors of the textbook construct certain kinds of relationships between themselves and their readers;
3. In what ways does the textbook perpetuate and reproduce canonical understandings of Race ?

In an attempt to address the research questions, the paper will examine three discursive devices used in the textbook as a means for shaping or (re)producing ideological values in the textbook *Zeitgeist*

1. the ways authors create racial 'versions of reality' based on their choice of words and how they combine words together.
2. How the textbooks establishes the power relations between the editors (authors) of the textbook and teachers and students (readers) ?
3. The ways in which authors of the textbooks draw upon and reinforce the larger systems of belief and knowledge that govern what counts as right or wrong, good or bad, and normal or abnormal in a particular society.

The paper analyses the selection of texts in the module and also analyse how the discourse of the textbook conveys certain select understandings of race. The discourse analysis of the textbook will be limited to the study of the introduction, glossary, exercise and activity sections of each chapter.

### **Racial 'Versions of reality'**

This section of the article will critically analyse the discourse of the textbook which places the texts in the module on Human Rights. The section explores how the textbook creates racial "versions

of reality” by analysing the editors choice of words in the introduction and glossary sections of the chapters

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *Zeitgeist* as ‘the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era’, the dictionary traces the etymology of the word to the German words ‘*Zeit*’ meaning spirit and ‘*geist*’ meaning time and is usually associated with the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who popularized it. In the book, *Modern Corporations and Hegel’s Ethical Corporation*, Thomas Klikauer states that for Hegel “*Zeitgeist*” meant the awareness of one’s time and the ability to reflect critically on it in order to be not asphyxiated by the spirit of that particular time and historical period. Such an understanding will include a thesis [*Zeitgeist*] and an anti-thesis in the form of reflection and overcoming the *Zeitgeist*.

Such an understanding of the title of the textbook necessitates that the textbook addresses the intellectual, moral and cultural issues of the time and critiques to them as well. The objective of the textbook as stated in the syllabus further attests to the assumptions and ascertains that it attempts “To understand the “human” as articulated among the various cultures and promote a multicultural and plural understanding of rights.” United Nations has also defined ‘Human Rights’ as rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.

The first chapter in the module on Human Rights is W.H. Auden’s ‘Refugee Blues’. The poem portrays the refugees’ search for asylum and a place to call home. At the outset, it appears as though the chapter addresses any and every refugee issue, but the discourse of the textbook proves otherwise. The discourse of the textbook places the poem in a niche-specific historical and geographical locale and specifically addresses the plight of the Jewish refugees in Germany alone. In the introduction to the chapter, the Jews in Germany are presented as being symbolic of all migrants, minorities and the persecuted. As the editors of the text themselves state, “The poem is often considered as one of the most significant responses in the context of the violation of the human rights of the Jews of Europe (who stand for the migrants, the minorities and the persecuted)” (*Zeitgeist* p. 69).

Thus the editors present the Jews as the universal representatives of all migrants, minorities and persecuted. However, throughout the introduction to the chapter, there is no reference to any other oppressed race despite the poem employing the metre of protest poetry. (*Zeitgeist* p. 70).

To further cement the ideas prefaced in the introduction, the glossary section of the textbook explicitly limits the scope of the poem to being one limited to the issues of Jews, thus the word “city” used in the poem becomes any city of Europe and America alone, reluctant to admit Jews alone (*Zeitgeist* p.71). Similarly the “country” in the poem becomes the country from which Jews are excommunicated and also presents their yearning for Palestine “the promised land of the Jews” (*Zeitgeist* p. 71). Thus the poem despite navigating an ideologically disputed terrain limits the scope of the textbook to the danger of a single story as proposed by Chimamanda Adichie (Adichie, C.N 2009).

The second chapter in the module, Nadine Gordimer’s ‘Amnesty’ presents the plight of a woman whose husband has been imprisoned for years during the Apartheid regime in Africa. The introduction to the chapter states, “The story portrays the deep racial divisions that infected South Africa under the apartheid regime.” While understanding racial division during the apartheid regime is important, the textbook limits the students’ understanding of racial divisions to the Black and White binary alone. “In the United States the grouping of individuals into Blacks and Whites has been and continues to be central in shaping American society and the curriculum as well”, argues William F Pinar in his essay, ‘Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text’. The argument holds true in the context of U.S.A, and as evidenced can be extended to the curriculum in India as well. The argument begs the question of how far the selection of such a text holds value in a textbook which claims to acquaint the students in Calicut with the currents and counter currents of the times. The danger of the text selection is further exacerbated by the alarming tendency among students to equate the apartheid as the only form of racism. It is imperative that the textbook informs or at least acquaints the students to the other discrete ways in which race operates amongst other



communities, be it the differential treatment of the Bengalis and Tamilians in Kerala (Devasia), of the North Eastern population as a community (McDuie-Ra, 2015), of the Kashmiris as a population (Pandit) or the many other forms of subtle racism in India. The text also remains silent on other forms of racism other than those meted out to the blacks.

The third chapter in the textbook is Sharankumar Limbale's 'The Outcaste'. It presents the students with the life of a Mahar student in school. The fact that out of the four chapters included in the module on Human Rights at least one chapter is on caste, a kind of Racial Segregation in India is a welcome move. In contrast to the other texts in the module, the introduction of the particular chapter acquaints the students with Dalit Studies, as critical discourse and the vast array of leaders who led the movement from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The textbook introduces the students to a wide array of authors from Mahatma Jotirao Phule to Bama Faustina and beyond. (*Zeitgeist* p. 82) Nonetheless, the students might be led to an understanding that the only contemporary human right issue plaguing India is caste; the many other human rights issue in India be it the treatment of the tribals or Islamophobia are all limited to the umbrella term "other marginalised sections" in the introduction (*Zeitgeist* p. 83). The introduction claims complete responsibility for representing all marginalised and reads as follows, "The best way to find out about dalits and the other marginalised sections..."

The fourth chapter in the module Yuval Noah Harari's 'Chemical Happiness and the Meaning of Life' defines happiness to be a consequence of the release of certain hormones alone. The ideas put forth by the chapters is in stark contrast to the rest of the chapters- the chapter has little to do with Human Rights. The only sentence in the chapter which at least remotely mentions Human Rights reads, "Human Rights is a fiction coined by human consciousness and believed by everyone in a group during what Harari terms the cognitive revolution."

The inclusion of the text in a module on 'Human Rights' is acceptable and alarming at the same time. On the one hand, the inclusion of such a text makes students aware of the diversity of

concepts which can exist even with an idea which is deemed to be universal, say human rights. But at the same time, being the concluding chapter of the textbook, the text risks the possibility of the students dismissing the idea of human rights as a whole, as they learn a text by an author who declares human rights to be a fiction coined by human consciousness and believed by everyone in a group during what he terms the cognitive revolution.

Hence, the text if not comprehended with the right intentions runs the risk of negating the purposes and premises of not merely the other texts in the module but also of glaring Human Rights violations rampant around us today. Going by the argument, it might be not an overstatement to say that students might even argue that racism and the caste system are merely individual aberrations.

### **Relationships between the editors (authors) and teachers and students (readers) of the textbook as mediated by the discourse**

This section of the article examines how the discourse put forth through the exercise section and activity section of the textbook reinforces the ideological underpinnings postulated by the editors of the textbook. And thus exposes the relationship forged between the authors of the textbook; the editors and the readers of the textbook; the teachers and students.

In the first chapter ‘Refugee Blues’ the exercise section of the textbook cements the idea of the marginalised and the minorities being Jews alone, with almost all questions adhering to the assumption of the Jews of Europe being representatives of all migrants, minorities and persecuted (*Zeitgeist* p. 69). Some questions attempt to merely evaluate the reading comprehensions skills of the graduate students, questions such as “Which tree blossoms ?” or “What is described as thunder rumbling in the sky ?” (*Zeitgeist* p. 72). The other questions attempt to make the “obvious” the “universal”, questions such as “What characterizes the alienation of the Jews in the poem ?” and “What is the context of the poem?” (*Zeitgeist* p. 72). A question infact states that “Refugee Blues is a documentation of denial of human rights of the population of the world.”, all the students are asked to do is discuss the dictated absolute truth, thus denying the students an opportunity to discuss whether the text fulfills the objective or not.

The only section in the textbook which categorically gives some power to the readers (teachers and students) of the textbook as well is the activity section. The section for instance demands the students' to discuss "Migration as a burning human right issue of the World". The question is open ended and gives the students an opportunity to understand human rights issue against the backdrop of texts which explore human rights violation affecting the world, through reference to movies such as *Sin Nombre*, *Fire at Sea* and *Parting* (*Zeitgeist* p. 72). Also as per the question there is no stated obvious but is rather to be explored by the student.

The second chapter 'Amnesty' in the module also follows a similar pattern, while a few questions examine the basic comprehension skills of the LSRW, such as "In which magazine was the short story 'Amnesty' published?" or "For how many years was he sentenced to trial?" (*Zeitgeist* p. 80). The other questions merely reinstate the ideological postulations of the editors, one of the questions being "The treatment of racism in "Amnesty". Though on the periphery the question might appear to be open ended the discourse set forth by the textbook and the renaming of the text in the question ensures the exploration of only the kind of racism proposed by the editors of the textbook. Another question of the activity section reads "Nadine Gordimer's Amnesty examines the struggle of black South Africans to challenge the Apartheid. Discuss", the question once again restates the only way the editors of the textbook intend the readers to read the text, thus erasing any possibility of reading the text as a metaphor for other kinds of racism.

In this chapter as well, the activity section of the textbook becomes the only section of the textbook which lends some agency to the readers of the text. The activity suggests that the readers take the discussion further and asks the students to find texts similar to Chimamanda Adichie's *Sola* in their own mother tongue. Such an exercise deserves appreciation as it acquaints the students to Human Rights issues around them and thus equips them to address issues immediate to them. However, the next question in the activity section is again a return to the Apartheid through Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*. (*Zeitgeist* p. 81)

In the third chapter “Outcaste” as well, the exercise section proves to be merely a section for students to reiterate the postulates envisaged by the editors of the textbook throughout the chapter. Thus the students are asked to write an essay on, “The discrimination of dalits according to Limbale” (*Zeitgeist* p. 85) and to write an essay on “the caste - ridden Indian society”( *Zeitgeist* p. 86), both the questions selectively evade questioning the other human rights issues plaguing India and leaves no room for the possibility of discussing human rights violations in India. The editors portray caste as the be all and end all of all human rights issues in India. The only section which encourages the students to think of possible forms of discrimination beyond casteism is the activity section. The section states that “Discrimination of various sorts exists in the world” thus providing the possibility of thinking about other forms of discrimination( *Zeitgeist* p. 86) However, the second question in the activity section again reverts back to caste discrimination as it asks the students to compare Limbale’s *The Outcaste* to Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* and Y.B. Satyanarayana’s *Father Baliah*, both of them being texts on caste discrimination alone

In the concluding chapter “ Chemical Happiness and the meaning of life”, the questions in the exercise section of the textbook lead one to doubt if one is reading a science textbook or an english language textbook after all. Some questions read as follows “ How does Prozac lift people out of depression?” “ What is the paradox about happiness that Daniel Kahneman explains ? “ ( *Zeitgeist* p. 94), as is apparent there is hardly any attempt to explore the students’ readings of the society and culture (the subheading of the textbook) all that is demanded is a reproduction of the “facts” as dictated by the editors of the textbook. However, one question in the entire exercise section of the textbook provides some agency to the students and asks them to discuss how the concept of Human Happiness in the text is a critique of the present perception of Human Happiness ( *Zeitgeist* p. 94). Nonetheless, Harari’s idea of Human Rights being delusional is subject to scrutiny nowhere in the textbook except in the least noticed activity section. Even then the textbook deserves credit for the activity section presents the students with an opportunity to study the text in contrast to two texts which vouch for Human Rights.

But yet again the question addresses Human Happiness as a virtue rather than Human Rights, the whole premise of the module as stated in the objectives of the syllabi.

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Activity section of the textbook reveals that the activity section of the textbook is the only section in which there is a dismantling of hierarchical power structure between the author -reader. In this section the authors (editors) are not in charge of handing down “universal” truths to the readers (students and teachers) but are rather invited to be participants in weaving the strands of the narratives against a solitary “universal” narrative. But the plethora of possibilities put forth by the activity section of the textbook is further tarred by the positioning of the activity section in the textbook. The activity section is positioned at the end of the chapter, such a positioning of the activity section of the exercise makes it an easy target to be left unread even when the issues it addresses often the crux of the module.

### **Re(producing) the canon**

This section of the article attempts to portray how the textbook merely (re)produces the canon of textbooks by comparing the contents of the “*Zeitgeist*” as a textbook to earlier textbooks of Calicut University. Thus the textbook becomes merely another textbook in the long line of academic discourse mediated by textbooks.

The comparison of “*Zeitgeist*” to the earlier textbook “*Readings on Society*” (2014) reveals that a module on Human Rights existed in the previous textbook as well. Thus as Mikhail Bakhtin argues in his work, *Speech genres and other late essays* (1986) all utterances, both spoken and written, from the briefest of turns in a conversation to a scientific paper or a novel, are demarcated by a change of speaker (or writer), and are oriented retrospectively to the utterances of previous speakers (be they turns, scientific articles, or novels) and prospectively to the anticipated utterances of the next speakers. Thus the textbook as well is intertextual and is constituted by elements of other texts.

Norman Fairclough in his work *Discourse and Social Change* (1992, pp 101-102) quotes Julia Kristeva to explain his understanding of intertextuality as per Critical Discourse Analysis. Fairclough notes Kristeva's observation that "intertextuality implies 'the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history' (1986a: 39). By 'the insertion of history into a text, she means that the text absorbs and is built out of texts from the past (texts being the major artifacts that constitute history). By 'the insertion of the text into history', she means that the text responds to, re-accentuates, and reworks past texts, and in so doing helps to make history and contributes to wider processes of change, as well as anticipating and trying to shape subsequent texts." Such a process is what we observe in "*Zeitgeist*" as well, while the textbook retains canonicity in the structure of the module, the contents of the module undergo significant changes.

The module on Human Rights in Readings on Society contain two chapters, "Stigma, Shame and Silence" by Kalpana Jain and "Yes, I am happy...Don't you believe" by Santhosh John Thooval, the chapters focus on medical humanity and geriatric studies respectively. However from a racial perspective the module is limited to the study of the Indian race alone. On the other hand, though the last module in "*Zeitgeist*" retains its focus on Human Rights the text re-accentuates and reworks the past structure of the module so as to include chapters with texts from a wider canvas.

The intertextuality is also visible in the exercise section of the textbooks. In the earlier textbook "Readings on Society" there are a vast majority of questions in the exercise section which attempt to evaluate the comprehension skills of the students. In fact there are even questions with ready made answers which merely summarize the texts (2014, Readings on Society, pp.103,113), such questions only serve to augment the position of the textbook editors (authors) as the active speaker and of the students and teachers (readers) as the passive listeners. On the other hand in the later textbook "*Zeitgeist*", though the text retains canonicity through a number of questions on reading comprehension the activity section of the textbook leaves room

for ideological opinions of the students. Thus though the author - reader relationship is preconceived in the textbook, it leaves some space for negotiation.

## **Conclusion**

The Critical Discourse Analysis of race in the academic discourse of the module 'Human Rights' in the textbook '*Zeitgeist*' reveals that the textbook employs different discursive devices to drive the readers to the ideological assumptions postulated by the editors of the textbook. The first chapter 'Refugee Blues' employs the Historical Discourse through which the textbook presents Jews of Europe as representatives of all migrants, minorities and persecuted. The second chapter 'Amnesty' by Nadine Gordimer borrows the Racial Discourse of America and thus presents racial segregation as a social issue which plagues the Blacks and Whites of America alone. The subtle forms of racism in South Asia and India are not academic enough to be part of the academic discourse. Contrary to the binaries which are portrayed in the earlier two chapters of the module, the third chapter presents a broader spectrum through which caste operates and influences us, presenting the origin and evolution of Dalit Studies as a discourse. The fourth chapter in the module, 'Chemical Happiness and the Meaning of Life' by Yuval Harari solely relies on the scientific discourse and denies the role of the social factors in the violation of human rights issues of the World. The chapter runs the risk of questioning the very status of Human Rights, one could doubt if it is a delusion as mentioned by Harari or if it is a reality as presented by the other chapters of the module. The exercise and activity sections of all the four chapters aids the creation of a hierarchical power structure between the editors (authors of the textbook) and the readers (teachers and students), wherein the former adorns the role of the active speaker and the latter of the passive listener. In addition, it is evident that all the textbook does, is reproduce the canonicity of the earlier textbooks through a selection of texts which match the title of the module. As Toni Morrison writes, "Canon building is Empire building... Canon defence is national defense" (1995, Pinar, p. 8). Thus, attempts to recognise the reproduction of the canon and attempts to defend the canon

reproduction academically are defensive strategies for a nation racially or otherwise.

The outcome of such a curriculum may only be what Barry Troyna and Richard Hatcher warned us of when they said, “Racist behaviour may be partially suppressed inside the school but only to be driven outside the school gates.” (1995, Pinar p. 354) Hardly are there attempts to meet the objective that the syllabus ambitiously proposes, “to promote a multicultural and plural understanding of rights.”

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