A SOCIO-COGNITIVE STUDY OF THE NOVEL, "WE ARE NOT LIKE THEM", FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RACISM

Zain Fatima[1*], Muhmammad Irfan Ahmad[2]

[1*]English Lecturer at Riphah International University, Islamabad
[2]PhD Scholar at National Defence University, Islamabad

[1*]zain.fatima@riphah.edu.pk; [2]mirfan@ndu.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research aspires to engage in a socio-cognitive discourse analysis of the novel, "We Are Not Like Them", from the perspective of racism. It explores the reinforcement and disruption of racial dynamics and prejudices within this compelling narrative. Conceived by Christine Pride and Jo Piazza, the novel, "We Are Not Like Them", provides a panoramic view of the contemporary American society, delving into the subtle demonstrations of racism in various forms and hues. Focused through a lens of critical race theory, this study is informed by the analytical framework of socio-cognitive discourse analysis. It aims to examine how racial biases, ideologies, and power disparities are constructed and subverted via social cognition and interactions among various characters. Reflecting on micro and macro structures of a society, this research forays into how racism manifests itself within memory as fundamental beliefs and interpersonal relationships. In view of the ultimate goal of establishing an egalitarian society, this analysis attempts to highlight the cross racial challenges, overcome through the mutual bond of love, and selfless friendship between two main characters of the novel. By locating the novel within broad spectrum socio-cultural and ideological contexts, it promotes an ongoing dialogue on race, power dynamics, and identity, urging readers to endorse social justice and equity.

Key Words: Discourse, cognition, society, ideologies, race, power.

INTRODUCTION

Racism, a pervasive and persistent social malaise, continues to formulate the very structure of contemporary society, leveraging interactions, power dynamics and identities. Literature, in this regard, often acts as a mirror reflecting the nuances of racial ideologies and their impact on everyday life affairs. The narrative of the novel, "We Are Not Like Them" by Christine Pride and Jo Piazza, unveils the shooting of an unarmed and harmless black teenager committed by two white cops, setting the tone for racial tensions. This poignant and compelling work of fiction serves as an appealing platform to examine the intricate interplay of discourse, power and race in contemporary America.

By critically dissecting the novel, "We Are Not Like Them" through the employment of a socio-cognitive approach, (van Dijk, 2017), informed by critical race theory (Bonilla Silva, 2017), this research seeks to unearth the complex web of racism within social relationships. It incurs readers to investigate the ways in which discourse, language, and social structures mould our perceptions of ourselves and other social actors in a society characterized by racial inequalities.

Statement of the Problem

Racism remains a deeply ingrained and persistent social issue, exercising its continuous influence on individual perceptions, interpersonal dynamics, societal structures, and identities. The problem at the core of this research lies in the investigation of how racism is reinforced, constructed, and challenged within the discursive and communicative landscape of the novel.

Specifically, the critical study seeks to unfold the crucial ways in which characters' social interactions, discourse strategies, language use and cognitive operations reinforce or resist racial biases and hierarchies.

Research Questions
1. What discursive practices within the novel, We are Not Like Them, do reflect the production, comprehension and perceptions of racial identities?
2. How far does the socio-cognitive mechanism within the novel, 'We Are Not Like Them' contribute to addressing racial challenges?
3. In what ways micro and macro structures of the society are interlinked?

Objectives
1. To identify and assess the discursive strategies and linguistic markers utilized by characters in the novel, "We Are Not Like Them," to build and negotiate their fixed racial identities.
2. To ascertain the ways in which micro structures of the society instantiate the macro structures through shared mentality and socio-cultural beliefs.
3. To explore the moments of racial tension and conflicted interests in the novel, and analyze how racial polarity reflects wider social practices and systemic injustice.

These research objectives serve as a roadmap for engaging in a socio-cognitive discourse analysis of "We Are Not Like Them" from the perspective of racism.

Significance
This study has wide-spread implications for navigating through the intricacies of racism in present day society. By unearthing the nuanced ways in which racism is entrenched in linguistic expressions and discourse markers, the analysis prompts the readers to critically reflect on conventional societal norms, the repercussions of historical injustice and power structures. The insights drawn from this study deepen our comprehension of the events and characters within "We Are Not Like Them", contributing to large-scale conversations on race, social justice and identity. Via socio-cognitive framework, this analysis lays stress on the importance of acknowledging the role of language in challenging or perpetuating racial hierarchies, prompting readers to strive for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Literature Review
Racism, as an enduring social issue, pervades individual perceptions, cultural narratives and societal structures. Critical Race Theory (CRT), in that regard, serves as a meaningful theoretical framework for grasping the intricate nexus of race and power in shaping various dimensions of society. Emerging in the legal domain of scholarship in late 1970s and 1980s, CRT evolved as a theoretical lens to evaluate how race meshes with systems of unlimited power and privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Crucial to CRT is the identification that racism leaves an indelible trace not only on an individual belief or attitude, but also takes roots in social, economic, political, and media structures (Bell, 1995). Therefore, scholars have taken recourse to CRT to assess the ways in which racism pollutes a society at both implicit and explicit levels. This involves the investigation of institutional practices, discourses and policies that reinforce racial inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2017).

One quintessential feature of CRT is its focus on the crisscrossing of race with other elements of social identities, such as class, gender, and sexuality. This blended approach holds that individuals suffer from numerous forms of oppression, tyranny and privilege simultaneously, causing nuanced and complex demonstrations of racism. By exploring these enmeshed features, scholars can better grasp the interlinked nature of social incongruences and inequalities (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Furthermore, CRT lays emphasis on the significance of counter-narratives and storytelling in resisting dominant racial beliefs and ideologies (Ladson-Billings, 1998). By focusing on unique experiences of racial discrimination and marginalized voices, literature can subvert prevalent stereotypes and provide alternative viewpoints on race and identity. This feature of CRT corresponds with the concept of narratives having power to transform social

perceptions and exert influence over holistic understandings of race (Yancy, 2021).

The recognition of historical legacies, ancient cultures and their long-lasting impact on current racial scenario constitutes an important feature of CRT. The current experiences of racial inequalities and bias against certain race perpetuate the legacy of systemic discrimination, colonialism and slavery (Alexander, 2012). CRT critics argue that it seems impossible to entirely grasp subtleties of racial underlining in society without paying heed to the historical context (Harris, 2011).

CRT critiques, often, promote colorblind techniques to racism, suggesting that overlooking race may cause racial equality (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). However, CRT accounts for an active engagement with racial issues and the recognition of its intersection with various other systems of oppression. This approach is particularly pertinent in literature and cultural studies, where colorblind narratives may lead to inadvertent perpetuation of racial stereotypes, and, thereby erase the experiences and voices of marginalized communities (Harris, 2011).

Research Methodology
The current qualitative research is conducted from the perspective of racism, which is delimited to critical race theory as a conceptual framework. The employment of socio-cognitive discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2008) informs the research design for this study. The triangular relationship between discourse, cognitive agency and society serves as a significant analytical model to dissect the racial ideologies embedded within the novel, We Are Not Like Them'. Van Dijk's Discourse, Society, and Cognition Triangle offers a comprehensive framework for the analysis of discourse as it relates to societal structures and cognitive processes. The model posits that discourse, the ways in which language is used in social contexts, is influenced by both societal factors and cognitive mechanisms (van Dijk, 2017). This framework allows researchers to delve into the intricate interplay between language use, societal power structures, and individual cognitive processes, providing a nuanced understanding of how discourse shapes ideologies and reflects sociocultural realities.

Figure 1
Interconnected relationship among discourse, cognition and society
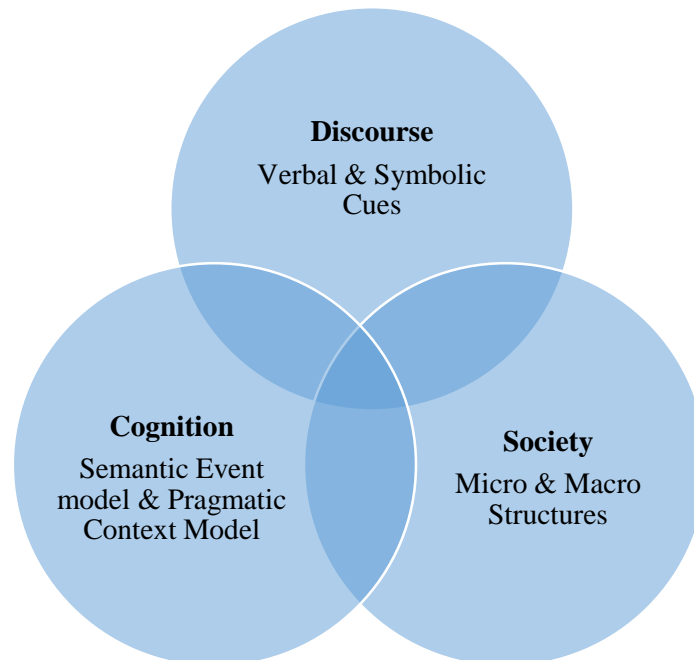
Discourse

In view of the verbal–symbolic nature of discourse, socio-cognitive discourse analysis, evidently, requires a well-defined 'linguistic' base, where 'linguistic' is considered in a broad sense. Irrespective of cognitive domain, and sociocultural dimensions, discourse always accounts for some of the detailed linguistic structures, sequences, strategies and various functions of text or talk. Discourse, thus, deals with grammatical, pragmatic, rhetorical, semiotic, interactional, stylistic, argumentative, narrative or similar meanings and forms and of the verbal, multimodal and para-verbal structures of interactive and communicative events (Van Dijk, 2009).

Cognition

Cognition includes memory processes as short-term, and long term episodic and semantic memory. Operating within the domain of long term memory are semantic mental models and pragmatic mental models. Semantic mental models are considered to be the subjective approaches towards particular situations and events observed. These are crucial cognitive ways to construct, conceive, and interpret reality. Also known as event models, semantic mental models are complemented by context or pragmatic mental models. These pragmatic models focus on the social schema and general representation of knowledge via societal norms, historical legacies and cultural ideologies that shape individuals' understanding of discourse. Context models also serve as a mediating force between discursive face and social structures (van Dijk, 2018).

Society

The third important dimension of socio-cognitive discourse is society, which is made up of micro and macro structures; where micro refers to local and macro refers to global structures. In other words, micro level consists of individual actors and their social interaction, whereas macro level accounts for social groups, organizations, movements, and institutions, including their nexus of power and dominance. These social structures may influence or be influenced by discourse via social cognition (van Dijk, 2008).

Analysis
Synopsis

With racial implications, 'We Are Not Like Them' by Joe Piaza and Christine Pride is a compelling novel that explores the intricacies of racial differences, friendship, love and social conventions in terms of the characters' memory record. Written in first person narrative, the story centers upon the friendship bond between two women—one black and other white. Their friendship is tested through an ordeal when tragic killing of a black boy, Justin Dwyer, embroils the white woman's husband, Kevin, in legal proceedings. Jenny desperately wants her friend, Riley Windsor, to assist her in the release of her husband, as he happens to be a police officer. However, Riley, as a news anchor, sides with the murdered boy, interviewing his bereaved mother exclusively as well. She also blames Jenny's husband, Kevin, for shooting Justin on racial grounds, much to the horror of Jenny. Then, in a heated exchange, both the friends, for the first time, discuss their racial difference and its impact on their decision-making abilities of life. Reflecting on her love affair, Riley reveals that she gave up on Corey solely on account of her racial complex. In the end, both the friends reconcile with each other, having a negotiated vision of race in their domains of life, with greater respect for human life, friendship, justice and fairness regardless of their distinct races. In a riveting manner, the novel unveils the theme of race, its impact on interpersonal dynamics, psychological underpinnings and privilege, prompting readers to ponder over contemporary racial crimes unfolding in America.

Discourse

The discursive aspect of socio-cognitive model encapsulates linguistic elements, such as, lexical, syntactical, rhetorical and communicative features. In addition to shedding light on social, cognitive and pragmatic domains, discourse analysis delves into linguistic basis as well.

For this discursive purpose, specific data, corresponding to the perspective of racial dynamics, is selected from the text of the novel, 'We Are Not Like Them'. From the outset, the reader's attention is grabbed by an embedded lexical phrase, 'Black boy' in the prologue of the novel, where capitalised B for black lays stress on

the theme of race the novel navigates. That black boy is, indeed, a fictitious character Justin Dwyer, who was shot by some police officers from Philadelphia.

The novel is interspersed with references to various proper nouns drawn from real life, such as Meek Mill, (Prologue),'Judge Mathis' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p.1) and Taya Digg (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p.9). Curiously, all of these lexical references, when explored, reveal black personages of prestige and fame idealized by black characters. For instance, the young black boy, Justin Dwyer is enamoured with Meek Mill, who happens to be a popular American rapper. Riley's grandmother, Gigi, loves watching Judge Mathis' show on TV, whereas, Riley herself idolizes a black American actor, Taya Digg, so much so that she makes use of a pillow with Digg's face printed on it. Perceptibly, black fictitious characters are portrayed as gravitating towards black statesmen in quest of their own identity.

Taking account of lexical items, employed by both the narrators to describe each other, euphonic difference can clearly be noticed. Jenn, the white narrator is described as 'breezy, outgoing, fearless' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p.3) and 'a little firecracker' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p.12). She is delineated as fun loving girl, when Riley reflects that she 'loves it's party' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 5), and that she 'deserves a fun shower' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 5). Gushing over Jenny's beauty, Riley comments in terms of pleasing adjectives, saying that she looks 'great' (Pride & Piazza, 2021: 6], and that she is 'glowing' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 7). In contrast, Jenny has nothing to offer Riley, even though she wants Jenny to notice how much more 'sophisticated and grown' [Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 41) she has become after three months at college. The only thing Jenny takes pride in is manifested through the use of epithet 'black' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 41) and 'weirdo (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 6) for her dear friend Riley. While Jenny basks in all the attention and lovely comments, Riley is portrayed as quite conscious about her body. She feels bothered by her 'hair getting frizzier and frizzier' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 2). As a twelve years old girl, she doesn't fancy 'having braces, and that stubborn patch of acne..., but on top of the bushy hair and

dark skin' (p. 51). Even Jenny's husband calls them both 'so...different' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 15).

The stark racial contrast between Riley and Jenny is also highlighted through the incorporation of dichotomous sentences. For instance, Riley claims that it is easier for Jen to make friends, as she 'fits in everywhere with everyone, (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 3]. Riley' expresses her mistrust in Jenny wondering, 'But can we trust her, you know her being white and all?" (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 12). On the other hand, Jenny stereotypes black people by thinking that 'all black people were psychic' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 12).

In an endeavour to demean Riley, Jenny resorts to the rhetorical device of cracking stereotypical, racial jokes at the expense of coloured people, as she is caught retorting to Riley, 'You are even pushing CP time' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 2). On another occasion, she sarcastically urges Riley to toil harder, saying, 'You gotta work twice as hard to get half as far as them' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 7). However, for her own self, she would rather have her wishes easily fulfilled, as she allusively calls herself an 'Aladdin's Lamp' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p.6).

Having said that, the mutual connection between Riley and Jenny is achieved through some syntactical phrases as well. On one occasion, Jenny addresses Riley by her actual name 'Leroya Wilson' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 4) as an act of endearment. As a matter of fact, Riley stops using that name to get rid of her identity as a self-conscious black girl. Riley, then, recalls her childhood memory of a visit to the 'Logan Square fountain' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 6), when both of them were caught on camera holding each other's hands and sporting 'matching pink polka dots' (Pride & Piazza 2021, p. 6) attires, which refers to the fact that mutual bonding of love and true friendship transcends racial differences.

Despite Riley's well-cherished friendship with Jen, she does suffer from racial discrimination when in conversation with a bartender in Jen's presence. Ironically, the bartender seems to be quite ingratiating towards Jenny and some other blondes. However, while conversing with Riley, he means all business, asking her briskly, "What can I get you" (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 11).

Hence, the use of discriminatory lexical items, divisive epithets, dichotomous syntactical

phrases, derogatory jokes, irony, allusions, sarcasm, and phrases of mistrust account for racial marginalization of the people of colour through discourse. However, the gap between both the races of black and white is bridged through language as well where it becomes a mode of connection, friendship and love, transcending all the racial differences.

Cognition

In accordance with the purposive sampling, some specific excerpts from the novel, 'We Are Not Like Them', have been chosen to execute cognitive analysis in terms of 'semantic event models' (van Dijk, 2008) and 'pragmatic context models' (van Dijk, 2008) –both being parts of long term memory.

Semantic Event Model

'Semantic Event Model' (van Dijk, 2008), viz., a mental model, is a part of episodic memory. It deals with the subjective representation of particular events experienced by the individuals. The memory of such distinct events is, eventually, propelled to the deep recesses of mind, where it is retrieved from whenever there is some strong stimulus.

In chapter three of the novel, 'We Are Not Like Them', Riley dredges up her memory of a college friend, Gaby. Riley gets moved by Gaby's personalized experience in an American institute where everyone, on the basis of her black skin, assumes that Gaby is 'a poor little girl' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 42), despite the fact that she hails from an utterly rich Jamaican family. The presumption about her social image as a black impoverished girl reflects shared mentality of stigmatizing black people as not just poor, but also dirty, as Riley's mother once explains 'that white people often think that black people are dirty' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 163). However, after a visit to Gen's untidy house and finding no washcloth around, Riley is then forced to question as to who is clean and who is dirty, indeed. In contrast, Riley's own family engages in rigorous cleaning practices.

On another occasion, Riley recollects the state of consternation she suffers, when her brother reveals his subjective and biased mental approach towards white girls as 'prettier' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 51).

On the same account of pre-determined individualized bias against black community, Gen hates her brother- in – law, Matt, who looks down upon her friend Riley, calling her an 'N-word' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 70). Matt's image is tarnished in Gen's mind on the basis of that memory which she can never reconcile with. Curiously enough, Gen gets rattled by her own memory of averting the idea of being black deep down in her heart when she is asked by her sister-in-law if she can imagine to be black. Even so, apparently, she expresses shock upon ghastly response of a white nurse, who blurts out, 'I feel lucky I'm not black' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 74).

Gen's instinctive racial disapproval of black people takes form in Riley's episodic memory as well, when Riley recollects Gen's xenophobic response to a hint at visiting India. In Jen's perception, it 'would be too dangerous' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 85) to visit India.

Pragmatic Context Model

Context models are considered to be a mediating cognitive tool that is applied to link the relevant structures of local (micro) situation to the social situation. Context models, regarded as mental models, are linked to the episodic memory as well. Context models enable the language users to connect their discourse with the social environment in order to make it adaptable and socially acceptable. They serve as a significant interface between discourse and social structures. (van Dijk, 2008).

Context models are represented by a pertinent schema comprising basic domains. These fundamental categories include a spatiotemporal setting, participants—their relationships, roles, identities, goals and ideologies —and the current social situation (van Dijk, 2008).

As per the tenets of the context models, the action of the novel, 'We Are Not Like Them', is physically set in the American city, Philadelphia, which is renowned for its Independence Hall, where the Independence Declaration was made. As to the time duration, the whole novel spans a few months until the ending.

The participants of the novel are various characters drawn from different racial backgrounds with particular social roles and identities. The main characters are Riley Wilson

and Jen, who happen to be the alternate narrators of the entire novel. Both are portrayed as best friends, reflecting on their unique friendship journey and life experiences. Riley seems poised by her social role as an educated and eminent TV channel news reporter, aspiring to become an anchor. Initially, she appears to be insecure and less satisfied with her identity as a black American girl, but, later, she gains confidence through her exposure at high school and career life. She even engages in a meaningful dialogue on race with Jen and her to-be life partner Corey. Endorsing her belief in social justice and equality, Riley even stands up to her friend, Jen, whose husband is involved in killing an innocent teenager, Justin Dwyer. In a cross-talk, Riley enquires Jen why 'it's not usually white guy being accidentally shot by police' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 58).

Jen, on the other hand, is a white American girl in her late 20's. Due to her financial limitations and carefree nature, she doesn't have a chance to enroll in high school. Later, she gets married to a police officer, Kevin. Jen, however, truly treasures her friendship with Riley, believing that 'she has fooled people, she has never fooled' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p.58) her. She naively regards her friendship free from the complexities of race, thinking that it has never mattered between them. She even gets Riley to talk comfortably about race so much so that Riley ends up comparing herself to oreo with her 'white bestie on one side, and a white boyfriend on the other' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 270) in a light hearted manner. Her firm stance for justice and equity thwarts her from reaching out to a mysterious white supremacists' organization, 'the Order of Kings' (Pride & Piazza, 2021, p. 144) to save her husband, even though the order sends them ten thousand dollars anonymously.

As to the social context, it is evident from the central event of the novel—the killing of a black teenage boy, Justin Dwyer—that it has been conceived in the backdrop of the actual brutal murder of a black American, George Floyd, at the hands of a white cop at Minneapolis in 2020. A white police officer, Derek Chauvin, pinned down the victim for about 10 minutes, causing his death due to choking (The New York Times, 2022).This ruthless murder, later, triggered the protests against police brutality, leading up to a worldwide social movement, "Black Lives Matter". The movement aimed at raising voices against racial discrimination and inequality inflicted upon black people (Adina, 2021).

Society
The society within the novel, 'We Are Not Like Them,' is represented by individual characters, and their interaction on the one hand as micro structures, and cultural norms and social institutions of media and judiciary on the other as macro structure. From mutual interaction between Riley and Jen, it is evident that their mental representation of reality as well as deeply ingrained beliefs about their social roles and identities are tied to the shared sociocognitive experiences of race. These social perceptions about race are promoted or challenged at times through media and judicial verdicts. For instance, a TV channel, KYX, broadcasts an exclusive interview of a grieving mother, Tamara, whose son has been victimized by the local cops. The interview reveals Justin Dwyer having the same interests in sports, music and studies as nurtured by any other young boy of his age without any speck of criminality, thereby dismantling the social misconception of felonies associated with the black community.

Conclusion
To conclude, the socio-cognitive discourse analysis of Christine Pride and Jo Piazza's novel "We Are Not Like Them" in light of critical race theory has offered invaluable insights into the nexus of language, power dynamics and social cognition of race within the narrative. The analysis, through the Event Model, reveal Riley and Jen's construction of their racial identities, drawing on their perceptions, memories, personal experiences, beliefs and visceral responses to the central event involving the police shooting an unarmed Black teenager to death. Furthermore, the Context Model elaborates the broader social discourses, historical legacies and cultural narratives that formulate characters' socially shared beliefs and behaviors, reflecting on the sustainable impact of racism on individual and social memory. Riley's emotional recollection of the events reflect the impact of prevalent racial inequity on her image of self and others. Whereas, Jen's initial connivance at the mention of racial

killing illuminates the colourblind phenomenon of the society to ignore the voices raised against racial aggressions at macro level. The analysis, ultimately, reveals how Jen's journey of facing her privileged self and attempt to perceive things from Riley's perspective via difficult conversation on race substantiates the power of discourse in disrupting racial barriers and dismantling racial beliefs, which paves way for social justice and harmony.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research on the novel, "We are Not Like Them", can open up new vistas to enrich the discourse on race and cognition. The comparative analysis of this novel with any other contemporary novel addressing the same theme of race and identity could provide insights into the ways authors represent and navigate these intricate issues. Moreover, a longitudinal study, investigating subtle changes in literary texts on the treatment of race over time, could offer potential perspectives on transforming racial ideologies, beliefs and power struggles. Additionally, an intimate exploration of the intersection of race with some other social variables such as class, gender and age could help unravel the complexities of identity formation. Lastly, a readers' response based study of the novel, "We Are Not Like Them", could bear scope for transforming perceptions on race and nurturing empathy across racial divisions.'

Authors Bibliography

[1*]*Ms. Zain Fatima is an English lecturer at Riphah international university, Islamabad. She is also pursuing her PhD in English Linguistics from NUML, Islamabad. In addition to this article, she has many other publications in renowned journals to her credit. Her passion for research is reflected through her participation in international conferences as well. Recently, she has presented her research article at a Language conference organized by Kursk State Medical University, Russia.*

[2]*Muhammad Irfan Ahmad is a PhD scholar at National Defence University, Islamabad. Besides pursuing his higher studies, he is a full time employee in armed forces. His area of interest is*

dealing with such international issues that need to be addressed through CDA.

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