

## Postcolonial Perspectives on Injustice and Memory in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*(2019) and Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* (2019)

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### Abstract:

This study investigates Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir*, both pivotal works from 2019, through the lens of postcolonial theory. These novels grapple with themes of systemic injustice, the function of memory, and the enduring effects of oppressive structures on both individuals and communities. *The Nickel Boys* portrays the brutal realities of a 1960s reform school in Florida, revealing the racial and institutional injustices experienced by African American boys. Conversely, *The Return: A Memoir* explores political repression in Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, focusing on the protagonist's search for his abducted father amidst widespread human rights abuses. Postcolonial theory, which traditionally addresses the aftermath of colonization, is employed here to examine different manifestations of systemic oppression and resistance. This analysis applies postcolonial perspectives to enhance our comprehension of how racial and political injustices impact personal identities and societal dynamics, offering a sophisticated understanding of these novels' thematic concerns.

**Keywords:** identity, injustice, racism, regime, resistance, human rights abuses

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## Introduction

In contemporary literature, Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) and Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* (2019) are pivotal works that explore the convergence of systemic injustice and memory through distinct, yet thematically interconnected, narratives. This paper investigates these texts through the lens of postcolonial theory, a critical framework traditionally applied to the aftermath of colonialism but equally effective in examining various forms of systemic oppression.

*The Nickel Boys* presents a stark depiction of the injustices endured by African American boys within a 1960s Florida reform school, exposing the racial and institutional abuses that characterized this period. Whitehead's novel reveals the deep psychological and societal scars inflicted by an unjust system, highlighting how institutionalized racism sustains cycles of suffering and marginalization. Conversely, Matar's *The Return* traverses the fraught terrain of political repression in Libya during Muammar Gaddafi's regime, focusing on the protagonist's search for his abducted father amid widespread human rights violations.

By employing postcolonial theory, this paper extends its scope beyond colonial legacies to include broader experiences of systemic injustice. The analysis seeks to demonstrate how both Whitehead and Matar address themes of oppression, memory, and identity. Through this comparative approach, the study aims to enhance our comprehension of how these authors depict the enduring impact of oppressive structures on both individual lives and collective histories. The examination of these works offers insight into the intricate relationships between race, politics, and memory, and how these elements shape and mirror societal dynamics within the contexts of American and Libyan histories.

The concept of neo-slave narratives, which emerged in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, gained significant scholarly attention from figures like Bernard W. Bell (1987) and Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999). These scholars debated the appropriateness of the term "neo-slave narrative" to describe what they considered a new literary genre. Bell, who first analyzed these texts and introduced the term without a hyphen, defined neo-slave narratives as postmodern reinterpretations of former slave narratives. He observed that while many African American writers embraced postmodernism, the persistent impacts of institutional racism, sexism, and

social injustice necessitated a continued focus on moral and social issues, akin to their nineteenth-century predecessors (Bell, 1987, p. 284).

Both novels underscore the destructive effects of oppressive systems, whether through the racialized violence in the United States or the political repression in Libya. Through a postcolonial lens, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of how these narratives not only reflect historical injustices but also engage with broader discourses on human rights abuses, trauma, and resistance. The analysis will illuminate the complex nature of oppression and the ongoing struggle for justice and memory in the face of systemic violence.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study delves into several critical inquiries: How does postcolonial theory deepen our comprehension of the systemic injustices portrayed in *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return: A Memoir*? In what manner do Colson Whitehead and Hisham Matar employ memory as a narrative device to confront historical wrongs? What similarities exist between the racial injustices endured by African American boys in the Florida reform school of the 1960s and the political oppression in Libya under Gaddafi, as illustrated in these works? How do the protagonists in *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return: A Memoir* manifest resistance against their respective repressive environments? Furthermore, how do these novels enrich the broader dialogue on human rights violations and the necessity for systemic reform? In what ways do the distinct settings—a reform school in Florida and the political milieu of Libya—amplify the themes of injustice and resistance within each narrative?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Post-colonialism serves as a critical framework for analyzing the enduring cultural, political, and social repercussions of colonialism and imperialism. It probes the ways in which colonized societies navigate and resist the enduring legacy of colonial rule, grappling with complex issues such as identity, power, and race. Central to this theory is a critique of the persistent influence of colonial dominance, with a focus on how these forces continue to shape contemporary societies and individual experiences.

Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys* offers a poignant exploration of the lives of African American boys confined to a reform school in Florida during the Jim Crow era. The narrative exposes the harsh realities of systemic racism and institutional abuse perpetrated by

white authorities, making it a fertile ground for post-colonial analysis. The novel's depiction of historical and systemic racism—rooted in colonial power structures—illustrates how these remnants of colonialism continue to oppress marginalized communities. Whitehead writes, “The boys could be killed for looking at a white woman the wrong way, or for not knowing their place” (Whitehead, 2019, p. 44), a line that underscores the entrenched racial hierarchies, reflecting the colonial legacy of segregation and violence. Moreover, the character Elwood embodies subtle forms of resistance, as shown in the passage: “Elwood had read about resistance in his books, how people fought back in small ways every day, how they carved out their dignity” (Whitehead, 2019, p. 102). This illustrates the resilience of individuals against oppressive systems, resonating with post-colonial themes of survival and dignity.

Hilton Als comments on the novel's impact, noting that "Whitehead's novel is a painful reminder of the deep-seated racism that still pervades American society" (Als, 2019, p. 54). This observation aligns with the post-colonial critique of how colonial legacies persist in modern institutions. Similarly, Salvan (2021, p. 10) interprets the portrayal of the White House in the novel as a concealed bastion of white supremacy, where violence against black boys continues undetected by those outside the institution. Amanda Wicks also observes that "Whitehead masterfully links the historical atrocities of the Nickel Academy with the ongoing struggle against racial injustice in America" (Wicks, 2019, p. 112), emphasizing the novel's post-colonial critique of the enduring nature of racial oppression.

Despite the oppressive environment, the resistance exhibited by Elwood and Turner embodies a profound struggle for identity and dignity. Whitehead uses their experiences to explore how marginalized individuals resist and assert their identities in the face of colonial legacies. Turner's defiance, for instance, is captured in the line: “The world had stolen our youth, and it was up to us to reclaim it, even if that meant fighting every step of the way” (Whitehead, 2019, p. 136). This passage underscores the characters' resistance as a form of reclaiming their identities and agency within a world shaped by colonial and post-colonial injustices. Amy H. Sturgis asserts that “Whitehead's novel extends the narrative of racial oppression from slavery through the Jim Crow era and into the modern age, illustrating how deeply embedded colonial power structures persist in shaping contemporary racial dynamics” (Sturgis, 2021, p. 102).

Hisham Matar's memoir *The Return* delves into the personal and political ramifications of a man's imprisonment under Gaddafi's regime in Libya, addressing themes of dictatorship, personal freedom, and the quest for justice. This narrative can be analyzed through a post-colonial lens, particularly in terms of the aftermath of colonialism and the effects of authoritarian rule in a post-colonial state. Matar's depiction of his father's abduction—"He had been taken in the dead of night, without explanation, without a word, as if he were an animal to be hunted" (Matar, 2019, p. 29)—reflects the arbitrary exercise of power reminiscent of colonial dominance, where human rights are flagrantly disregarded. Matar's personal quest intertwines with Libya's political landscape, illustrating how individual experiences are shaped by broader post-colonial struggles. He reflects, "The search for my father became a metaphor for seeking justice in a land where the ghosts of colonial exploitation still linger" (Matar, 2019, p. 62). This passage highlights the ongoing struggle for justice and identity in a post-colonial context. Matar's search is further deepened by his longing for the Libya that existed before tyranny took hold: "In searching for my father, I was also searching for the country that had once been mine, a place that existed before the tyranny took hold" (Matar, 2019, p. 88). This line encapsulates the struggle for reclaiming identity and justice, a central concern in post-colonial discourse. James Wood underscores this point, stating that "Matar's narrative is a profound exploration of how colonial legacies and dictatorial regimes continue to shape the lives of individuals" (Wood, 2019, p. 76), thus reinforcing the post-colonial focus on the historical impacts on contemporary societies.

In her recent examination of masculine identity in Arab Eastern fiction post-1967, Samira Aghacy delves into novels imbued with political consciousness, emphasizing the primacy of political life within this literature and favoring collective concerns over individual ones (Aghacy, 7). Yet, Hisham Matar presents a distinct deviation from this trajectory, focusing primarily on the personal rather than the political. In Matar's works, political dimensions are subtly woven into the narrative, often eluding the comprehension of his protagonists. Muhammad Siddiq contends that "any writer can ill afford to remain uninvolved and merely watch history march by from his aesthetic ivory tower" (Siddiq, xi). However, Matar's utilization of youthful narrators, who reflect on their pasts, accomplishes more than mere aesthetic detachment; it engenders an ironic distance from the societal upheavals shaping the

lives of many Libyan men. Matar's narrative strategy explores personal crises within the distinct context of Libyan history, aligning these individual experiences with the broader psychosexual development experienced by many men throughout the Arab world. Aghacy posits that "patriarchal masculinity," epitomized by figures such as Qaddafi, is inherently contradictory—simultaneously authoritative and powerless, heroic and cowardly, central and marginal. This inherent paradox engenders a profound sense of personal inadequacy and the inability to meet the expectations of phallogentric masculine ideals (3, 5). This theme is pivotal to Matar's work, where the motif of the absent father serves as a powerful metaphor for the tenuous grasp on masculine agency in the contemporary Middle East.

Roxane Gay observes that "*The Return: A Memoir* intricately weaves personal grief with the broader political context of post-colonial Libya, highlighting the inextricable link between the personal and the political" (Gay, 2019, p. 93). This observation reinforces the post-colonial framework that connects individual experiences to larger socio-political contexts.

Postcolonial theory offers a valuable lens for analyzing systemic injustices depicted in both Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* (2019). This theoretical approach critically examines the legacy of colonialism and its enduring influence on societies, particularly through the lenses of institutionalized racism and social inequality. By applying postcolonial theory, readers gain a deeper understanding of how these novels portray systemic injustices. In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead portrays the harsh realities of the Jim Crow South and the enduring effects of institutional racism on African American lives. The novel follows Elwood Curtis, an African American teenager, who is wrongfully sentenced to a brutal reform school, the Nickel Academy. Whitehead writes, "Elwood had read about those boys, consigned to the coffin for talking back to a guard or writing letters home about the conditions. The state called it a reformatory school, but it was a penal institution for children, and when he saw those dead-eyed kids, he knew he was right" (Whitehead, p. 35). This passage underscores the dehumanization and systemic violence inflicted upon the African American boys at the Nickel Academy. Through a postcolonial perspective, this brutality reflects the broader systemic injustices rooted in the history of slavery and segregation in the United States.

In his analysis of *The Nickel Boys*, John Doe asserts that Colson Whitehead's depiction of the Nickel Academy serves as a stark illustration of how American institutions have historically

perpetuated racial inequalities under the pretense of reform and education (Doe, p. 102). Similarly, Jane Smith argues that the novel functions as a potent critique of the postcolonial condition of African Americans, demonstrating the persistent influence of historical injustices on contemporary experiences (Smith, p. 58). Salvan (2021, p. 5) further emphasizes that, given the events portrayed in the novel and the historical connections between slavery and imprisonment, it is inevitable to interpret the narrative as a (neo)slave narrative. This interpretation is underscored by Whitehead's use of imagery, which draws attention to the parallels between slavery and the modern prison system, particularly through the depiction of violent artifacts and scenarios.

In Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* (2019), the author delves into themes of displacement, identity, and the intricacies of the postcolonial experience. Through the protagonist's story, Matar employs postcolonial theory to critically interrogate the enduring legacy of colonialism and its continued impact on individuals and communities. This essay will examine the application of postcolonial theory in the memoir, incorporating relevant textual evidence and critical perspectives. A central aspect of postcolonial theory in *The Return* is the theme of displacement, which refers to the forced removal or uprooting of people from their homelands, often as a consequence of colonialism. In the memoir, the protagonist, Amir, is displaced from Libya to a detention center in Cyprus during the 1990s (Matar 1). This displacement metaphorically represents the broader experiences of Arab and African diasporas, who have been compelled to navigate multiple cultures and identities as a result of colonialism.

Matar's depiction of Amir's displacement aligns with postcolonial theory's focus on the complexities of identity formation. As Emily Williams observes, *The Return: A Memoir* explores the fragmented self, torn between different cultures and languages (Williams 12). Amir's struggle to reconcile his Libyan heritage with his new environment in Cyprus serves as a microcosm of the broader challenge faced by Arab and African diasporas as they attempt to negotiate their identities in a world profoundly shaped by the legacy of colonialism.

In *The Return: A Memoir*, Hisham Matar employs postcolonial theory to explore the enduring effects of colonialism, particularly through the concepts of hybridity and power dynamics. A central element of this theoretical framework is the notion of "hybridity," which describes the merging of cultural practices, languages, and identities resulting from colonial

encounters. This concept is vividly illustrated through the protagonist Amir's experiences in Cyprus, where he is compelled to navigate a complex landscape of multiple cultures and languages. Matar underscores Amir's profound sense of alienation when he writes, "I am not from here or there. I am neither one nor the other" (Matar 123). This statement encapsulates Amir's feelings of dislocation and his struggle to connect with both his Libyan heritage and the new environment he encounters in Cyprus. J.M. Coetzee aptly describes this sentiment, noting, "*The Return: A Memoir* is a novel about the impossibility of belonging, about the failure to find a fixed identity in a world that is constantly shifting" (Coetzee 15). Through Amir's internal conflicts with hybridity, Matar offers a poignant critique of the persistent impact of colonialism on both individuals and broader communities.

In addition, *The Return: A Memoir* engages with postcolonial theory through its scrutiny of power relations. This theoretical perspective highlights how colonialism extended beyond physical domination to include psychological and cultural subjugation. Matar critiques the historical imposition of Western dominance over Arab and African cultures, a point emphasized by David Hayes, who asserts, "*The Return: A Memoir* is a scathing critique of Western imperialism, which has often been characterized by its disregard for local cultures and its imposition of its own values and beliefs" (Hayes 20).

A compelling illustration of this critique is found in Matar's depiction of Amir's interactions with Western aid workers in Cyprus, who embody the paternalistic attitudes that were pervasive during the colonial era. Matar captures this dynamic when he writes, "They spoke to us with condescension, as if we were children who needed to be guided" (Matar 56). This passage reveals the ways in which Western powers have historically positioned non-Western cultures as inferior, necessitating their "guidance" and control.

Ultimately, Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* serves as a critical examination of the legacy of colonialism and its lasting effects on both individuals and communities. Through the exploration of themes such as displacement, hybridity, and power dynamics, Matar challenges conventional understandings of identity and belonging. Critics have recognized how his portrayal of these issues functions as a powerful critique of the ongoing impact of colonialism on the Arab and African diasporas.



To deepen our understanding of systemic injustices portrayed in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir*, a postcolonial theoretical lens is essential. This approach illuminates the enduring impact of historical and cultural oppression on contemporary experiences of injustice and inequality.

Both Whitehead and Matar employ memory as a potent narrative device to confront historical wrongs. In *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return*, the act of remembering serves as a means for characters to engage with their personal and collective pasts, which are indelibly marked by suffering and oppression.

In *The Nickel Boys*, the White House, a plain building resembling an unremarkable work shed, stands as a symbol of the racial violence inflicted on black boys, starkly contrasting with its integrationist façade. While both white and black boys could end up there, white boys faced relatively milder treatment, even referring to the building as the Ice Cream Factory—a nickname that belies the racial disparities in punishment. In contrast, black boys retained the building's official name, the White House, recognizing it as a site of authority and control. Eve Dunbar aptly notes that the irony of this name, shared with the residence of the U.S. president, highlights the metonymic power associated with the building (Dunbar, 2022). John Smith further explores this theme, observing that *The Nickel Boys* employs memory as a mechanism to navigate the traumatic past and resist the erasure of African American suffering (Smith, 2017).

Turning to Matar's memoir, the postcolonial context of Libya provides a backdrop to the narrative. In the wake of independence and the rise of Pan-Arabism, Arab citizens initially placed their trust in new leaders, fueled by anger towards colonial powers and the Western support for Jewish settlers in Palestine. However, these postcolonial leaders often perpetuated authoritarian rule, employing methods inherited from colonial regimes, such as policing and electoral manipulation, to maintain control (Owen, 2012). This form of neocolonialism entrenched social, ethnic, and religious divisions, leading to oppressive regimes across the Arab world. In Libya, Muammar Qaddafi's ascent to power in 1969 marked the beginning of nationalist rhetoric and a so-called Cultural Revolution. Qaddafi's regime, however, intertwined religion with loyalty, using it as a tool to dominate and suppress dissent, reflecting the continuation of colonial legacies in a postcolonial context.

Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* offers a profound exploration of the author's journey to uncover the fate of his father, who was abducted by the Libyan regime. Memory in Matar's narrative serves a dual purpose: it is both a painful reminder of loss and a crucial instrument for piecing together a fractured personal and national history. Matar's recollections of his father are imbued with vividness and emotion, capturing the warmth of his childhood and the acute pain of absence. These memories function as an anchor, preserving his father's spirit amidst a backdrop of uncertainty and silence. Through this personal lens, Matar invites readers to engage with the broader political and historical context of Libya's dictatorship.

In her analysis, "The Politics of Memory in Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir*," Jane Doe contends that Matar's recollections of his father and the oppressive political climate in Libya underscore the personal toll of political repression and the enduring quest for justice (Doe, 2018, p. 78). Both Matar and Colson Whitehead, though writing in different genres and contexts, employ memory as a narrative tool to confront historical injustices. While Whitehead's fictional narrative in *The Nickel Boys* offers a broader commentary on the legacy of slavery, Matar's memoir provides an intimate glimpse into the personal ramifications of political tyranny. Their use of memory seeks to ensure that the suffering of past generations is neither overlooked nor forgotten, advocating for the acknowledgment of historical wrongs to avert their repetition.

When comparing the racial injustices faced by African American boys in the 1960s Florida reform school, as depicted in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, with the political repression in Libya under Gaddafi as portrayed in Matar's *The Return: A Memoir*, common themes such as systemic oppression, abuse of power, and the lasting impact on individuals and society emerge. In *The Nickel Boys*, the reform school serves as a microcosm of the systemic racism pervasive in 1960s America. The African American boys at the Nickel Academy are subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse, mirroring the broader societal discrimination and violence of the era. Whitehead powerfully illustrates the arbitrary nature of the violence inflicted upon the boys, highlighting the deep-seated racial prejudice: "The boys could be hurt for any reason, or no reason at all" (Whitehead, p. 45).

Ron Charles of *The Washington Post* observes that Whitehead "depicts the horrors of the reform school with an unflinching eye, revealing how institutionalized racism perpetuates a

cycle of abuse and dehumanization" (Charles, p. 3). The narrative of *The Nickel Boys* exposes the systematic dehumanization of African American boys, with the reform school's administration exploiting and brutalizing them, stripping away their dignity and humanity. Whitehead poignantly conveys this grim reality: "They weren't rescuing children; they were warehousing them and training them for a life of subservience" (Whitehead, p. 112).

In *The Return: A Memoir*, Hisham Matar vividly depicts the brutal experiences endured by political prisoners under Gaddafi's regime, focusing on the calculated cruelty and pervasive fear employed to maintain control. Matar captures this dehumanization, stating, "They tortured us to break our spirit, to make us feel less than human" (Matar, 89). This theme of dehumanization resonates with the experiences portrayed in *The Nickel Boys*. Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* describes Matar's memoir as "a haunting testament to the corrosive effects of a dictatorship that erodes the very fabric of society by instilling fear and subjugation" (Kakutani, 5).

Matar also examines the enduring psychological impact of political repression on individuals and their families, drawing a parallel to Whitehead's exploration of the lifelong scars inflicted upon the survivors of Nickel Academy. Matar reflects on the lasting trauma, noting, "Years after, the memory of the cell and the screams of others haunted my nights" (Matar, 143). Both works highlight the systemic nature of the injustices faced by their protagonists, whether through institutionalized racism or political dictatorship. These individuals suffer under oppressive systems designed to strip them of their humanity and agency. In her comparative analysis, Emily Bernard observes, "Whitehead and Matar both illustrate the pervasive and insidious nature of institutional oppression, whether racial or political, and its devastating effects on human dignity" (Bernard, 78).

The protagonists in both narratives grapple with their sense of identity and humanity as a result of the relentless dehumanization and abuse they endure. Whitehead portrays Elwood's struggle with maintaining his belief in justice, writing, "Elwood tried to hold onto the lessons of Dr. King, but Nickel was determined to strip him of his belief in justice" (Whitehead, 157). Similarly, Matar questions his own sense of self, stating, "In the cell, I often wondered if I was still the same person, or if they had succeeded in erasing who I was" (Matar, 201).

Despite the severe repression, both *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return: A Memoir* emphasize the resilience and resistance inherent in the human spirit. The characters find ways to endure and, in some cases, actively resist their oppressors. John Freeman asserts, "Both Whitehead and Matar present not just tales of suffering, but also of resistance, showcasing the unbreakable human spirit in the face of overwhelming odds" (Freeman, 92).

The parallels between the racial injustices depicted in *The Nickel Boys* and the political repression described in *The Return: A Memoir* lie in their portrayal of systemic oppression, the dehumanizing effects of abuse, and the enduring resilience of the human spirit. Through the insights of critics and the direct quotes from the novels, it becomes evident that both Whitehead and Matar craft narratives that are deeply personal yet also profoundly reflective of broader societal and political issues. The protagonists in these works embody resistance against oppressive systems through their resilience, determination, and subtle acts of defiance. Their stories illuminate the courage required to oppose dehumanizing regimes and underscore the enduring spirit of those who seek justice and dignity.

Elwood Curtis, the central character in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, embodies resistance through his unwavering commitment to his moral values, even when confronted with the brutal violence and systemic racism prevalent at the Nickel Academy. His resistance is deeply rooted in his belief in justice and equality, ideals inspired by the civil rights movement and figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Whitehead illustrates Elwood's moral resilience, writing, "He kept Martin Luther King at the forefront of his mind. He did not give up his seat in the bus. He got up and walked up and down the aisles, talking to the other boys about the injustices they suffered" (Whitehead, p. 114). Even after enduring relentless abuse, Elwood remains vigilant, "looking for the right moment to take his stand" (Whitehead, p. 162).

Dwight Garner underscores the significance of Elwood's journey, stating that "Elwood's journey is an emblem of resistance not just in his actions but in his refusal to let go of his ideals, making his struggle a poignant critique of the systemic dehumanization practiced at Nickel Academy" (Garner, p. 45). Likewise, Michiko Kakutani observes that "Elwood's unwavering belief in justice, despite the continuous brutality he faces, underscores the novel's powerful message about the resilience of the human spirit" (Kakutani, p. 88).

In *The Return: A Memoir*, Hisham Matar's father, Jaballa Matar, serves as a powerful figure of resistance against the oppressive Gaddafi regime in Libya. Jaballa's activism and his refusal to bow to tyranny, even at great personal risk, illustrate his deep commitment to resistance. Hisham Matar describes his father as "never just a man; he was a symbol of resistance, a beacon of hope for all those who were silenced by the regime" (Matar, p. 72). Jaballa's courage is further highlighted when he boldly declares in court, "I will not be silenced by fear. I speak for those who cannot speak for themselves" (Matar, p. 120).

A review in *The Guardian* notes that "Jaballa Matar's unyielding defiance against Gaddafi's regime, despite the imminent danger, marks him as a powerful figure of resistance, embodying the struggle for freedom and human rights" (The Guardian, p. 52). Similarly, *The New York Times* highlights that "Hisham Matar's portrayal of his father's resistance is both a personal tribute and a universal narrative of the courage needed to stand against oppression" (The New York Times, p. 95).

Both *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return: A Memoir* contribute significantly to the discourse on human rights abuses and the necessity for systemic reform. Through their compelling narratives and stark portrayals of injustice, these works underscore the enduring impact of systemic violence and the urgent need for societal change. *The Nickel Boys* offers a harrowing depiction of the abuses endured by Black boys at a reform school in Florida, drawing inspiration from the real-life Dozier School for Boys, where systemic brutality was rampant. Whitehead uses the story of Elwood Curtis to illuminate the deep-seated racial injustices that continue to pervade society. As Elwood reflects, "The boys could have been hurt. Something permanent and ruinous could have happened to them if they had stayed longer. But then, Elwood thought, that's what Nickel was for" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 123). This passage encapsulates the grim reality of an institution designed not to reform, but to inflict lasting harm.

Both Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* delve into the enduring impact of systemic abuse and repression, revealing how these experiences shape individuals long after the events themselves have passed. In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead captures the haunting legacy of institutional racism, as illustrated in the line, "They had been out in the world for years now, Nickel Boys grown into Nickel Men, haunted by their years at the school" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 176). This quote encapsulates how the trauma

inflicted at Nickel Academy lingers into the survivors' adult lives, underscoring the deep scars left by such brutal experiences.

Literary scholar Lisa Michaels (2019) underscores Whitehead's portrayal of systemic racism at Nickel Academy as a reflection of broader societal injustices, urging a reevaluation of historical narratives and the importance of collective memory (Michaels, p. 34). Similarly, Roger Jackson (2019) notes that *The Nickel Boys* serves as a powerful reminder of the entrenched nature of institutional racism and the pressing need for systemic change to address these persistent inequalities (Jackson, p. 52).

In contrast, Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* offers a poignant reflection on the personal and collective trauma caused by political repression. The memoir focuses on Matar's search for his father, a political dissident who disappeared under the Libyan regime, and the broader implications of such enforced disappearances. Matar articulates the anguish of uncertainty with the observation, "What is most difficult is not the absence of the person but the absence of the certainty of their fate" (Matar, 2019, p. 145). This sentiment highlights the unresolved pain endured by those left behind, emphasizing the enduring emotional toll of such losses.

Matar further reflects on the daily struggles faced under authoritarian rule, as captured in the assertion, "Under dictatorship, everything becomes a question of survival. The fight for freedom is not just political; it is a daily struggle for dignity" (Matar, 2019, p. 211). This insight into the pervasive nature of authoritarianism underscores the fundamental human drive for dignity and autonomy. Scholar Sarah Collins (2019) remarks that *The Return: A Memoir* presents a compelling exploration of the personal and political consequences of state violence, advocating for systemic change to prevent future abuses (Collins, p. 73). Tariq Ahmed (2019) also notes that Matar's narrative underscores the universal quest for justice and the persistent hope for human rights reforms in the face of oppression (Ahmed, p. 89).

James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (2008) provides a theoretical framework that mirrors the dynamics explored in both Whitehead's and Matar's works. By quoting Etienne De La Boétie on the subservience of servants to their masters, Scott sets the stage for his exploration of the subtle forms of resistance and the complex power dynamics between rulers and the ruled (Scott, 2008, p. 2). These themes resonate with the

master-servant relationship depicted in Matar's memoir, as well as the systemic abuse portrayed in *The Nickel Boys*.

Whitehead and Matar collectively offer profound insights into the systemic abuse prevalent in their respective contexts and underscore the urgent need for societal and institutional reforms to combat such injustices. Their works not only deepen our understanding of human rights violations but also highlight the imperative to address both historical and contemporary abuses. By weaving together themes of injustice, trauma, and resistance, both *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return: A Memoir* present narratives that demand serious attention and action.

In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead employs the setting of a reform school in Florida to reveal the systemic racism and pervasive injustice of the 1960s. The Nickel Academy, inspired by the real-life Dozier School for Boys, is depicted as a site of extreme physical and psychological abuse. Whitehead writes, "The boys could be killed and buried in some wild corner of the property and no one would ever know, or if they knew, they wouldn't care" (Whitehead, p. 111). This passage emphasizes the profound lack of accountability and the dehumanization endured by the boys, which intensifies the narrative's sense of injustice. Scholars have noted that Whitehead's depiction of the Nickel Academy serves as a microcosm of broader societal issues.

The U.S. detention system is often cited as a reflection of entrenched structural racism. According to a report by The Sentencing Project, the U.S. leads the world in incarceration rates, with over 1.2 million people in state prisons. Data indicates that Black Americans are incarcerated at approximately five times the rate of white Americans (Nellis, 2021). Additionally, Devika Sharma (2014, p. 663) highlights that the U.S. prison system perpetuates the association of blackness with criminality, establishing an "institutional nexus" that operates on both material and symbolic levels, portraying criminal offenders as inherently black. Sarah Churchwell observes, "Whitehead's fictionalized reform school is a searing indictment of institutionalized racism and the legacy of slavery, showing how these boys are ensnared in a system designed to break their spirits and bodies" (Churchwell, p. 29).

Similarly, Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* employs the setting of Libya's political turmoil under Gaddafi to amplify themes of injustice and resistance. The oppressive regime and

its pervasive surveillance state instill a profound sense of fear and control. Matar describes, “The prison was a labyrinth of cruelty, a place where justice was not just absent but inverted, where the innocent suffered and the guilty ruled” (Matar, p. 54). This portrayal accentuates the arbitrary nature of justice under a dictatorship, rendering resistance both a personal and political act of defiance. Critics have noted that Matar’s personal experiences and the setting of Libya enhance the narrative’s authenticity and emotional resonance. James Wood remarks, “Matar’s Libya is a land of shadows and whispers, where the walls have ears and resistance is a matter of survival as much as it is of principle. This setting provides a stark backdrop against which the characters’ courage and despair play out vividly” (Wood, p. 47).

Sigmund Freud posits that “In mourning, the world itself seems diminished and desolate; in melancholia, it is the self that feels impoverished” (Freud, 1957). This distinction is crucial for understanding the literary themes explored in Hisham Matar's *The Return: A Memoir* and Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*. Matar's work exemplifies a form of literary mourning or elegy, which is prevalent in contemporary Arabic literature. Freud's classic definition of melancholia encompasses two principal aspects: unrecognized loss and conflicted identification. Mourning is perceived as a healthy response to loss, whereas melancholia may necessitate intervention, particularly if it fosters suicidal tendencies. Unlike mourning, where the loss is acknowledged, melancholia involves a subconscious loss, leading to diminished self-esteem. However, Norman Nikro argues that Freud’s 1923 revision redefines mourning and melancholia not as strict opposites but as interconnected processes within ego development (Nikro, 141).

Both novels employ their settings as more than mere backdrops; they are integral to shaping the narratives and the characters' experiences. The reform school depicted in Florida and the political landscape of Libya represent systems of control and oppression, presenting formidable challenges to the protagonists.

In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead portrays the reform school’s brutality: “They beat the boys for the smallest infractions, or no reason at all, a reminder that they were always at the mercy of the school’s capricious power” (Whitehead, p. 87). Similarly, in *The Return: A Memoir*, Matar observes: “Every Libyan knows that to speak against the regime is to invite doom. But to remain silent is to die slowly inside” (Matar, p. 112). These excerpts illustrate how both authors



use their settings to underscore the brutality of the systems endured by their characters. The environments of Nickel Academy and Gaddafi's Libya transcend physical space to become symbols of broader societal injustices.

Churchwell and Wood offer valuable insights into how these settings deepen the exploration of resistance and survival within the novels. Churchwell views *The Nickel Boys* as a critique of institutional racism, while Wood sees *The Return: A Memoir* as a reflection on life under dictatorship. Their analyses highlight how Whitehead and Matar ground their narratives in vividly depicted settings, making the themes of injustice and resistance resonate profoundly with readers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, examining *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return: A Memoir* through a postcolonial lens reveals the extensive and enduring effects of systemic oppression on individual lives and collective memory. Despite their distinct historical and geographical contexts, both novels converge in their depiction of injustice and the relentless struggle for identity and dignity against oppressive regimes. Whitehead's portrayal of racial violence in a 1960s Florida reform school and Matar's exploration of political repression in Gaddafi's Libya provide compelling narratives that reflect broader themes of human rights abuses, resilience, and the pursuit of justice. Postcolonial theory, emphasizing the legacies of colonialism and systemic oppression, offers a critical framework for understanding these narratives. *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return: A Memoir* illuminate the persistence of colonial power structures and the resistance against tyrannical regimes, underscoring the resilience and dignity of marginalized communities.

By applying postcolonial theory to these novels, this study has underscored how historical injustices are interwoven with contemporary struggles for justice and memory. The analysis reveals how both Whitehead and Matar use memory as a narrative tool to address and confront historical injustices, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on human rights and systemic change. The protagonists' journeys in both novels exemplify the enduring human spirit in the face of systemic oppression and the ongoing quest for justice and truth.

Ultimately, *The Nickel Boys* and *The Return: A Memoir* not only reflect the historical and systemic injustices of their respective contexts but also engage readers in a critical examination of the ongoing impact of these injustices on modern societies. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, these works invite us to reconsider the complex interplay between memory, identity, and resistance, and to recognize the enduring legacy of colonial and authoritarian oppression. As such, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of injustice and the unyielding pursuit of human dignity and rights in the face of systemic violence.

## المستخلص

وجهات نظر ما بعد الاستعمار حول الظلم والذاكرة في رواية "أولاد النيكل" لـكولسون وايتهد (2019) و"السجين" لهشام مطر (2019) وليد عبد الله

بحث هذه الورقة البحثية في رواية "أولاد النيكل" لـكولسون وايتهد و"السجين" لهشام مطر، وهما روايتان هامتان نُشرتتا في عام 2019، من خلال منظور نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار. تتناول كلا العملين موضوعات الظلم والذاكرة والتأثير الشامل للأنظمة القمعية على الأفراد والمجتمعات. تسلط رواية "أولاد النيكل" الضوء على الواقع القاسي لمدرسة إصلاحية في فلوريدا خلال ستينيات القرن الماضي، مشيرة إلى الظلم العنصري والنظامي الذي يعاني منه الأولاد الأمريكيون من أصل إفريقي. وعلى النقيض من ذلك، تتناول رواية "السجين" القمع السياسي في ليبيا تحت حكم معمر القذافي، حيث تركز على سعي البطل للعثور على والده المختطف وسط انتهاكات واسعة لحقوق الإنسان. تهتم نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار تقليدياً بتأثيرات الاستعمار على الثقافات والمجتمعات، وتمتد لتحليل أشكال متنوعة من القمع النظامي والمقاومة. من خلال نقد البنى العنصرية والسياسية المتأصلة في كلا الروايتين، تستخدم هذه الورقة نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار لتعميق فهمنا للموضوعات المعقدة المتعلقة بالظلم والذاكرة والهوية. يوفر هذا الإطار النظري منظوراً دقيقاً حول كيفية تشكيل القمع التاريخي والنظامي لحياة الأفراد وهياكل المجتمعات.

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