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**Desire in Times of Apartheid: A Trigger for Rebellion.**

**The Case of *The World Unseen*.**

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Grau en Estudis Anglesos**

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# 1 Abstract

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Set in Pretoria in the 1950s, Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen* explores a territory of unexpected, prohibited relationships during South Africa's Apartheid. The racist and oppressive system did not only affect personal freedom, but it also had an enormous psychological impact on the victims. The novel successfully portrays a wide array of relationships occurring in the area and, on some occasions, its terrible consequences. However, even in this situation of injustice, characters are driven by the one element that triggers unrest, and leads them to challenge laws and conventions: desire. The aim of this paper is to argue in favour of desire as a trigger for rebellion. So as to prove this thesis, a brief theoretical framework about Apartheid and the dynamics of race and gender will be provided. Next, the numerous relationships taking place in the novel will be carefully analysed, paying special attention to those that suppose a break with laws and traditions. Inside this set of relationships, the most important one will be the main focus of the novel: the homosexual relationship between Miriam and Amina. The last point to support this thesis will be an analysis of the character of Miriam, and how her relationship with Amina connects with a rebellion in Miriam's personality, giving way to a more rebellious, free woman.

## 2 Introduction

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Many authoritarian regimes aim at justifying the status quo and elite dominances using either religious, moral or supposedly rational arguments. Consequently, their impact does not only affect civil rights, but it also permeates the citizens' insights and mentality. South Africa's Apartheid was no exception, and the reach of its oppressive laws into the personal behaviour was clearly portrayed by Shamim Sarif, an Indian Muslim author born in Britain, in her novel *The World Unseen*. Published in 2007, the novel was largely inspired by her grandmother, and the hardships she faced as an Indian woman living in South Africa during Apartheid<sup>1</sup>.

Set in Pretoria in the 1950s, *The World Unseen* explores a territory of unexpected, prohibited relationships. Living during Apartheid, the hardships suffered by the characters in order to share a life with their loved ones are tough and unsettling. The readers learn about the numerous interracial relationships occurring in the area and, in some cases, their terrible consequences. The main focus of the novel is the relationship between two Indian women: Miriam, the apparently perfect and conformist housewife, and Amina, a young and rebellious businesswoman. Despite their different personalities, and even having internalised the conventions of white supremacy, they face the difficulties and discrimination driven by the one element that triggers unrest, and leads the characters to challenge the status quo and the law: desire.

The aim of this paper is to argue in favour of desire as a trigger for rebellion. In order to support this point, I have decided to use the following structure: To begin with a solid basis, I will briefly describe the regime of Apartheid and mention some of the

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<sup>1</sup>The information about Shamim Sarif and the inspiration for this novel has been extracted from Rachel Scott's article in *The Guardian* (See Bibliography).

laws prohibiting interracial relationships, namely those which affect the characters in *The World Unseen*. Next, I will analyse the behaviour of some characters, and the way they relate to each other, from a race and gender studies perspective. Through a close exploration of the numerous relationships appearing in the text, I will try to prove my point and locate desire as both a trigger and a vehicle to challenge the regime and, therefore, a driver for change. The last point to support this thesis will be an analysis of the character of Miriam, and how her desire for Amina and their complicated relationship goes hand in hand with Miriam's rebellion against her husband and, most importantly, against the oppressive and unfair system defined by Apartheid.

It should be noted that Sarif also directed a cinematographic version of this novel, released in 2009 by her own production company. Although the comparison of the film and the novel, and more specifically the analysis of the music and the treatment of the environment that the film carries out would be extremely interesting, for this paper I decided to limit myself to an analysis of the novel. However, the film version would be suitable material for further research.

### **3 Apartheid and the Dynamics of Race and Gender**

In order to fully understand the framework where the story develops, it is key to be acquainted with the context in which the characters lived, namely the oppressive regime of Apartheid. After British colonialism, white population had consolidated their hegemony in South Africa, running along with a tradition of segregation since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was connected, of course, to a “fear of blackness” (Schwarz, 2011: 228), which led whites to control black population and keep separate lives. After its victory in the 1948 elections, the National Party was able to use its control of the government to fulfil Afrikaner (that is to say, white) goals. South Africa became an independent republic in 1961, therefore disengaging itself completely from Great Britain. In addition, this nationalist government also made a fierce effort to maintain white supremacy. With this aim, it extended the previous segregation laws and tightened them up.

The term “Apartheid”, which means “separateness” in Afrikaans, was initially part of a political slogan, when the regime was presented as “separate development”. Eventually it became the name associated with the series of laws and executive actions which oppressed the non-white South African population. In addition to maintaining supremacy, these policies allowed control of black labour and thus promoted economic growth for white population (United Nations, 1972; Thompson, 2001).

There were four main ideas central to the regime: First, the population was to be divided into four groups: White, Indian, Coloured and Black/African. Second, whites were considered to be the civilized race, thus being entitled to absolute power. This allowed white hegemony to be secure until the mid 70s, preventing all non-white people from voting (Terreblanche, 2000). Third, white interests would prevail over black ones.



Fourth and last, while the white racial group formed a single nation, the African group was divided into several ones, hence making the white group the largest majority (Thompson: 2001). This created a highly imbalanced society, where white people counted on excellent public services and high wages, while services for non-whites were scarce or inexistent, creating huge differences among the population.

For the purpose of this paper, it is crucial to take into account the laws that were focused on separating the racial groups and to prohibit interracial relationships, thus preventing miscegenation. The most relevant ones in relation to the novel are listed below:<sup>2</sup>

- Group Areas Act n·41 (1950) - requires that the population be assigned to separate areas and territories.
- Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act (1949) - converts into a criminal act marriage between persons of different races, enforcing a caste system.
- Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953) - public buildings and facilities in “white” areas- use denied to Africans, Coloured and Asians for marriages, celebrations and other social purposes.
- Immorality Act (1957) - converts into a criminal act sexual intercourse between persons of different races.

It can easily be extracted, from the observation of these laws, that Apartheid was a period of harshness and difficulty, and less than ideal for love among individuals of different racial groups. Although all these restrictions were clear, I could not find a specific law prohibiting same-sex relationships. This fact is, of course, central to the

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<sup>2</sup> All the laws quoted and their descriptions have been extracted from: United Nations. *Basic Facts on the Republic of South Africa and the Policy of “Apartheid”*. New York: United Nations, 1972.

development of the novel. It will be seen how, having no explicit restrictions, Miriam restricts herself and has the feeling that a relationship with another woman, even if she belongs to the same racial group as her, is to a certain extent wrong and condemnable.

It is undeniable that the system of Apartheid had a deeply rooted component of racism. Racism shaped South African society, and, consequently, conditioned human relationships. Before exploring the relationships occurring in the novel, especially those that pose a challenge to the system, some literature and scholar's views on race and gender will be described below, so as to further understand the novel's society and its legal system, as well as the insights of the characters.

When dealing with race, there is a tendency to focus on non-white races. Whites are considered as individuals, but in racist discourses all the members that belong to a certain "race" are englobed in a homogeneous group and generalisations are made. According to Dyer (1997), it is necessary to move away from the idea that white is the norm, therefore "making whiteness strange" (p.4), and studying it in the same way other ethnicities are. Racial generalisations are dangerous for non-whites, who have been, throughout the years, classified as inferior, savage and uneducated. While some attempts were made to support those categorisations using ill-constructed biological arguments, "[...] classifying by race is, at least from a biological point of view, pointless or even meaningless" (Dupré, 2003: 101).

There is no scientific evidence that the physical differences among ethnic groups may result in a difference in their capacities. Whites created a hierarchy to justify their harsh treatment of non-whites (Hunter: 2005), and also protect their power. It should be noted, however, that non-whites being in a position of disadvantage in most societies, they found difficulties to accomplish the same as whites, since they could not access the

same resources (Dupré: 2003). This fact can be clearly connected to Apartheid, where blacks had very limited or even no access to schooling, since the best education was reserved to white areas. Unequal achievements, therefore, came from unequal opportunities, not from racial differences.

The consequences of racism spread much beyond legal or physical repression. The psychological consequences for those in an underprivileged position are also part of the effects of racism. The oppression and suppression of individuality results in the internalization of inferiority on the part of the oppressed. There comes a point where the oppressed subjects see this subjugation as licit and even deserved, making non-whites assume inferiority as their fair position (Fanon: 1952 & Yamato: 1995). The effect of such assumption is not only regarding non-whites as inferior, but also acknowledging whites' superiority. It is as a consequence of this assumption when the following situation may occur: "the black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man, there is but one destiny. And it is white" (Fanon, 1952: 202). Therefore, some non-whites, in an attempt to be as the desired and powerful model, the white man, will replicate the behaviour of white people, thus perpetuating racist attitudes. This will be dealt with in more depth when the character and behaviour of Omar is examined.

Racist generalisations go beyond the consideration of non-whites as intellectually inferior. The representation of African bodies and African sexuality was another denigrating aspect that reinforced white hegemony. This was connected to the division into "racial groups", and perpetuated the view of black people as savage and uncivilized. African women were often considered to be promiscuous, and were represented in a hyper sexual way. The representation of African men was similar, and they were seen as being sexually potent and, most importantly, aggressive, with an

inclination towards rape. Blackness was perceived as appealing and dangerous at the same time (Young, 1994).

What is striking about this representation is that, while being represented in such a way, black men were also believed to be unmanly, undermined and emasculated by their white “superiors” (Lewis, 2011). In opposition, white bodies were represented according to the ideals of Christianity, following the model of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary (Dyer: 1997). While white people had a halo of pureness and divinity, Africans were seen as savage, closer to nature and driven by animalistic instincts. This representation of African bodies, especially that of African men, was not only important to reinforce the ideals of Apartheid, but it will also become crucial during the analysis of *The World Unseen*.

However hard the position and discrimination was for non-white males, the situation worsened for women. There is an intertwining of race and gender that makes the two concepts impossible to dissociate (Dyer, 1997). In the case of non-white races, the connection of race and gender is denigrating not only at the level of race, but it also places women as clearly inferior to men. In this situation, “the orthodox hierarchy of gender is confirmed and reaffirmed at the level of race, which in turn feminizes males and females alike in the black and yellow races” (Young, 1994: 111). Such an affirmation confirms the view of non-white males as castrated by white superiors. In addition, the position of non-whites as uncivilized was considered by imperialists as a “feminized state of childhood” (Young, 1994: 24), and the desired status was that of “cultured” Europeans (that is, whites). These affirmations pose an important question: if the terms “feminizes” and “feminized” are used to emphasize the inferiority of non-white races, what is the position of women belonging to non-white racial groups? As Hunter (2005) puts it, “oppression is not simply additive as in ‘race + gender’, it is

multiplicative in the sense that race and gender multiply and create new systems of oppression [...]” (p. 10). Hence, it is central to the understanding of this novel, that the discrimination that non-whites have to endure, and that has been dealt with above, works at a different level in the case of women. It is in this position, at the meeting point of the struggle for race and gender, where we find our two protagonists, Miriam and Amina. Both of them being non-white and female, they sit quite close to the bottom of this categorization.

The last point to pinpoint in this framework overview is related to how heterosexuality and homosexuality are contemplated from the point of view of racism. This is crucial when considering race and gender, and it will also become important when the relationships in the novel are analysed in depth. The importance of heterosexual relationships is especially central for the white “race”, since it is through heterosexual reproduction that it will be able to maintain its presence and its power over others (Dyer, 1997). There is a clear connection between this view and the regime of Apartheid. As mentioned earlier, heterosexual reproduction among racial groups was strongly prohibited and persecuted, there was an enormous fear of miscegenation, it was believed that, by mixing their blood with that of non-whites, the “white race” would degenerate, become less pure (Young, 1994). I strongly believe that, the main issue of miscegenation in South Africa was that even the argument of the supposed superiority of white people would become meaningless if the population mixed, since there would be no such thing as “whites”.

When considering homosexual relationships, however, they are not perceived as dangerous. Instead, mixed-race homosexual relationships seem to be defended: “if all blacks and yellows are ‘female or feminized’, then the white male becomes instinctively attracted to both sexes (Young, 1994: 109). In this case, an explanation is provided for

the whites' attraction towards other "races", regardless of the sex. It is interesting how there seems to be a justification for the domination, over not only of non-white societies, but also of non-white bodies.

However, and most interestingly, I could not find statements considering same-sex relationships inside a racial group, neither positive nor negative ones, as if such thing was inexistent or unimportant. These relationships, therefore, suffer the danger of invisibility, they are not taken into account nor given a voice. One possible explanation could be that they were not perceived as a challenge to the white dominance. However, the relationships that I will be dealing with, even if initially based purely on desire, truly end up challenging the very roots of the common social and racial assumptions. In addition, the value of this novel resides, in part, in this ability to make same-sex desire visible, through Miriam and Amina's relationship.

## 4 Race and Gender Dynamics Exhibited by the Characters

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Having explored what scholars have said about race and gender dynamics, it is important to see how these understandings actually connect to the characters of *The World Unseen*. The novel goes to great extents to portray the injustices that the South African black population had to endure, very much in line with the points of view previously covered. In this section, I will cover how the behaviour and personality shown by the characters connect with the theories that have been reviewed above.

The first character that will be covered is, in my view, the embodiment of the white race, a dominant male figure. That is, of course, Officer De Witt. Interestingly, his name provides a clue of how much he represents the white section of the population, since the literal translation of his surname, from Afrikaans, is “The White One”. In addition, he uses his power, both as a white man and as a legal authority, to ensure the hegemony of whites. We can observe that he believes himself inherently superior to non-whites, and has no problem being brutal against them, as he tells Miriam, “You know if you are lying to us I’ll beat you and your children and your baby?” (P. 163)<sup>3</sup>. The depiction of whites in this novel would be really harsh if it were not for the fact that De Witt is always accompanied by his colleague, Officer Steward. Although Steward is also a police officer, he provides readers with another perspective of a white person, he is less strict with the accomplishment of separation laws, and is close and helpful to non-whites, as is the case with Amina. In addition, some other white characters, as is the case of Madeleine Smith, provide still another point of view, showing that even some whites may be against Apartheid. However, Officer De Witt acts as an extremely

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<sup>3</sup> For the following sections, the quotations have been extracted from Sarif, Shamim. *The World Unseen*. London: Enlightenment Productions Ltd, 2007.

oppressive figure, portraying perfectly the regime of Apartheid and the hegemony of whites at that time.

Another remarkable character is Omar, Miriam's husband. In him, we find contradictory behaviours. On the one hand, Omar seems to have internalised his own inferiority, since he shows an extremely submissive and servile attitude when he is faced with white people, especially the white costumers that visit his shop. His coloured costumers, however, are treated completely different, and he is constantly suspicious of them stealing. It is seen, therefore, that he is clearly a perpetuator of racism and, additionally, of gender violence. He mimics<sup>4</sup> the behaviour of whites by pre-judging those who belong to "inferior races", as is the case of Robert, the black/coloured houseboy<sup>5</sup>. His behaviour shows that Omar, while considering himself inferior to whites, has assumed superiority over other racial groups, integrating deeply the racist assumptions behind the regime of Apartheid.

This imposition of authority is also directed to Miriam, his wife. He possesses absolute control over her life, even of her working life, as remarked by Amina: "I'm offering the job to you, not your husband" (p. 243). The abuse leads to a point where he even hits his wife, angry for the fact that she has helped an injured black man. Thus, Omar can be perceived perpetuating not only racist assumptions, but also sexist ones.

The last character analysed in this section will be Jacob Williams, Amina's business partner. I truly believe that he is a clear example of how the regime of Apartheid made the abused believe their own inferiority, internalising racist

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<sup>4</sup> See *Mimicry* in Ashcroft, B, Griffins G and Tiffin, H. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London & New York: Routledge, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> There is ambiguity about whether Robert is Coloured or Black. His case clearly displays the absurdity of divisions, since it is not easy for readers to pinpoint to which group he belongs to.



assumptions. Jacob is an old, intelligent man, with a good eye for business. As a reader, I found him one of the most lovable characters. That is why I feel terrible when he holds himself back instead of realizing his potential because of his race. Being coloured, he is resigned to the submissive position reserved to him by the law, and accepts it even though it is not fair. This will be further explored when his relationship with Mrs. Smith is analysed.

## 5 Analysis of Relationships

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In order to prove my thesis on desire as a trigger for rebellion, I am going to analyse the relationships that appear in this novel. This will give an overview of how interactions develop during the plot and whether the characters accept racial assumptions or, instead, challenge them.

The first group of relationships that I will analyse are those that occur between a black person and an Indian one. Shockingly, both of them are (allegedly) the result of rape. The consequences of these relationships are extremely harsh, and they seem to reinforce racist stereotypes, labelling black men as sexually aggressive and inclined towards rape. The first case is, of course, Begum, Amina's grandmother. Her story is extremely heart-breaking; she was raped by a black worker, and, afraid of the consequences, she kept it secret. However, Amina's mother was born as a result of this rape, and her curly hair and dark skin revealed that she was not descendant of Begum's husband. As if rape was not bad enough for Begum, her family takes a striking action: they beat her terribly, expel her from the country and take her older son away from her.

The other victim of rape is, supposedly, Jehan, Omar and Sadru's sister<sup>6</sup>. In this case, it is not really clear whether she was raped, or she chose to have a relationship with a black man, but in any case, "Omar and Sadru only preferred to think that Jehan had been raped" (p 46). Whatever the case, this relationship also brought terrible consequences. As a result, Jehan becomes affected by a sexual illness that is the root of her insanity. She becomes completely dependent on her disapproving family, particularly Farrah, her sister-in-law, who treats her badly and only gives her the dregs

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the plot about Jehan has been eliminated from the filmic version. This fact would be interesting for further research.

of food, and stale milk. Despite her illness, however, Jehan will appear to be more important and intelligent than her family believes.

Apparently both cases would lead to assume that the novel is reinforcing racist assumptions, and offering a terrible image of black men, which would go in line with the regime of Apartheid. This is due to the fact that there are not many characters in the novel who are black, most of the characters that appear are either Indian or coloured. However, taking into account the whole novel and the message it transmits, I believe that this interpretation would be too simplistic. It is true that the image of black people given by these two cases is not positive, but it is Indian people who appear to be judgemental, racist and extremely cruel. They are shown to despise and even mistreat those of their own family, due to associations with black people. Indian families are, in this novel, perpetuating the racial division established by Apartheid. I decided to analyse these relationships in order to remark that they are based on violence. Therefore, they are completely different to the ones based on desire and free will, which will be covered later on in this section. Furthermore, the outcome of these violent relationships is not a challenge to Apartheid but, instead, a reinforcement of racist assumptions.

Next, I will deal with the relationships that occur within the same racial group, and even more, within the same family, an Indian one. As in the cases previously covered, they are not the result of love or desire. Instead, they come from a set of arranged marriages, which result in disconnection and mistreatment. This is certainly the case of the marriages of Sadru and Farah, as well as Omar and Miriam. In both marriages, we see a clear disconnection. There are no instances where we find them interacting in a couple-like manner. However, the reason why I chose to mention these relationships is due to the clear dominance that the male figure has in both of them.

Both Farah and Miriam are under the control of their husbands, who are in charge of all of their decisions. An early example of this, in the novel, is found when Farah exclaims “They said we can go! To the Bazaar Café. For lunch!” (p.33). This is just a sample of how much the husbands dominate everything their wives do. It is also clearly seen that women take for granted that males are entitled to this domination. As Omar puts it; “If I don’t like it, that should be enough” (p.313). Gender roles are perpetuated inside these relationships. Participants tend to maintain the status quo in a similar way to the violent relationships mentioned above.

In addition, there is an illicit relationship occurring within this set. That is the relationship between Omar and Farah, his sister-in-law. Surprisingly, in this case it is Farah who takes the initiative and has a dominant role within their affair. Nevertheless, Omar keeps a dominant role over his own wife Miriam, who acts submissive and keeps silent, tolerating a relationship that hurts her. This attitude will gradually change during the development of the plot, and readers are able to see an enormous change in Miriam’s personality; that will be further analysed below.

The Indian marriages and adulteries help in illustrating the point that even when the laws of Apartheid concerning same-race relationships were followed, they did not account for better or happier marriages. These couples stay together due to pragmatic reasons instead of emotional ones, which leads to unhappiness and discomfort. This clearly contrasts with the next group that will be dealt with.

Up to this point, the relationships that have been observed have been undesired and mostly unhappy and unsatisfactory. However, there seems to be a hint of hope for love and desire in times of Apartheid, in spite of the enormous hardships. The next set of relationships analysed will not only prove this point, but also show a rebellion against

the racist system. Those are, of course, the relationships that occur between racial groups. The first one that I will be dealing with is the relationship between an Indian woman; Rehmat, Omar's twin sister, and her white husband; James. The couple live in Paris, and pay a visit to James' sick father. The main reason for them to live so far away from their families is, of course, no other than the racist tendencies in South Africa. Both Rehmat and James fought fiercely against those who opposed their relationship, but, as Rehmat puts it, "I fought it so hard I had to leave" (p.104). However, their families are not the main problem anymore, since the passing of the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949); which makes of their marriage an illegal one. In words of Omar, "My father may be dead, but the South African government is much worse" (p. 96).

That affirmation is indeed confirmed by the prosecution Rehmat has to endure after returning to South Africa. Her family is not thrilled to share time with her and her husband, but that is nothing compared to the weight of the law. The police, having heard that the couple are hiding, proceeds to interrogate Miriam. In an attempt to protect her children, Miriam confesses that Rehmat is staying at Pretoria, at Farah and Sadru's. The following episode narrates how Rehmat is prosecuted by the police. Luckily, thanks to Jehan, she finds help: Amina.

Amina, whose life has not been easy either, is keen on helping her, "she also wanted to talk to this woman about her life, about why and how she had run away from her family for the sake of love" (p183). The path, however, is not easy. The police use their force against Amina and keep searching for Rehmat, who, in the end, is able to get to the airport and flee the country, and be reunited with her husband. Even though the couple have to move away from South Africa, their rebellion is clear. They renounce to their country, their family and their inheritance, simply to be together. They both know

that the path in front of them is not likely to be easy, and that prejudices will have to be fought. “After all, Rehmat continued. I suppose most white people in the world – maybe even some of James’ family- will sit there like you, all self-righteous, and tell me that my children – your nephews and nieces - are half Indian” (p. 103). However, the couple is able to challenge the system and move away to another, more liberal country, leaving racist assumptions behind.

There is another interracial relationship which, sadly, does not seem to have such a hopeful outcome. That occurs between Jacob Williams and Madeleine Smith. In the character of Madeleine Smith, we find the most hopeful example of a white person, who affirms that “I have heard of Apartheid. [...] And I don’t much care for it, thank you.” (p.214). This is evident when she accepts Jacob’s invitation for dinner. However, it is Amina who calls to reason: “I know she’s a nice lady, and you like her, Jacob, but in the real world, you could get both of you into a lot of trouble (p.279). This is, sadly, the ugly truth. When their date comes, they are surprised by a policeman who enters Mrs. Smith’s post office. Suspicious, the policeman asks who Jacob is, and why he is standing at the “Whites only” section. To this, we see a reaction that spurs out of fear: “He’s my driver” (p.297). Sadly, this relationship never succeeds. After driving Madeleine home, followed by the young policeman, Jacob says good bye, resigned to know that they will never be able to be together in that society, and afraid to do anything that could put them in danger.

We can see, therefore, that Jacob, who is older and more tired than Rehmat, is unable to fight as hard when it comes to challenging the law. There’s only one instance where we see him able to do something completely against the regime, and affirming that “They have no right to keep us from seeing who we want to see” (p.279). Even

though this relationship is not successful in the end, the challenge towards racial assumptions is evident, on both parts, that of Jacob and that of Madeleine.

We have observed that, inside this group of relationships, the ideas of racism disappear completely. Regardless of the fact that the relationship can succeed or not, we see that its members abandon all judgement of others on account of their race and, instead, are moved by desire and ideals. However, these cases are exceptional, and they are persecuted by the rest of the society who are still unable to move away from racism.

The last relationship that will be analysed in this section is, of course, crucial for the novel: the relationship between Miriam and Amina, the most unexpected and rebellious one. Surprisingly, this relationship occurs between two opposite characters, who have completely different lifestyles (Stobie, 2005). On the one hand, we find Amina, a young woman who is not afraid to declare that “I am not everybody” (p. 70). Evidently, her business, her trousers and her defiance of the law do not conform to the norm of that time. Furthermore, Amina’s family believes that she “should have been born a boy” (p.22), since she is not married and taking care of her family and, instead, works. However, Amina herself asks “Why can’t a woman do both? - if she wants to, that is?” (p.148), proving that, moving away from stereotypical gender characteristics, she is a woman ahead of her time, who has her own beliefs and is not afraid to live by her own standards.

Initially, Amina’s personality would seem to clash completely with Miriam, an apparently perfect housewife, who does not seem to question the society she lives in. She conforms to what her family expects of her, and appears unable to challenge them. However, Miriam is much more complex than she seems at first glance. She also has interests and feelings, and it is Amina who is able to see through her, and refuse to

accept that Miriam is “just a housewife and a mother” (p. 115). Through their midnight conversations, readers begin to see how there is true complicity between them, they are able to share their thoughts and personal stories. For the first time, Miriam receives attention, is looked after, and taken into consideration. This is completely contrasted to Miriam’s cold relationship with Omar, her own husband.

However, their relationship is not an easy one. Even though there are no specifications about homosexual relationships in their country’s law, Miriam grows afraid of her own feelings. She is aware that she longs for Amina’s visits, and of the fact that Amina makes her happy, but she is still cautious. Not being able to look Amina in the eye, Miriam tells her: “It’s not right. I am married, and you are a girl” (p. 288). Although Miriam does not seem prepared to break with conventions completely, and live the life she truly desires, the ending of the novel seems to provide a glimpse of hope for this beautiful relationship. Miriam, going back to the café and accepting Amina’s job offer, can finally challenge her husband and move towards a happier future.

Amina and Miriam’s relationship is clearly challenging common assumptions, both in terms of race, and gender. Amina “[...] hate(s) apartheid and its stupid laws” (p.233), and Miriam grows aware of the injustices of the system. In addition, the roles they take are unexpected inside the Indian community, making them different and truly admirable. Nevertheless, the clearest example of how this relationship poses a challenge to the system of Apartheid is seen through the character of Miriam, whose development goes hand in hand with her relationship with Amina. In order to prove this point, Miriam’s development will be fully analysed in the following section.



## 6 Miriam's Development

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For the final section of this paper, I will explore how the relationship between Miriam and Amina shapes Miriam. Her development is gradual but clear, and it culminates with Miriam's rebellion towards her husband and, implicitly, towards the regime of Apartheid.

The moment Miriam is first presented to readers, she appears to be silent and resigned to her position as wife and mother. Her feelings are concealed, and she is reduced to simply obeying orders from her husband and her sister-in-law. Her life is absolutely miserable, living in a hostile environment where nobody (not even her husband) has smiled at her in ten days. However, the first contact with Amina changes this, creating an impact on Miriam's mind: "Her ten days of counting, of watching for some sign of concern or pleasure or kindness, had finally ended with the smile Amina Harjan had given her" (p.39). This first interaction plants the seed of their relationship, which will grow hand in hand with Miriam's personality.

This relationship continues once Amina accepts working at Miriam and Omar's garden. For the first time, the two women are alone, and can start real interaction and conversations. Through Amina, Miriam starts to remember some of her old interests, which she left due to her marital life. "I love reading. I used to. [...] I used to read a lot." (p. 118). In addition, Miriam, who is used to being completely ignored, is surprised by Amina's genuine interest. After their deep conversations, readers begin to see a change in Miriam, when she tells Amina: "You make me think. And that's a good thing, isn't it?" (p.150).

The first big change that we see in Miriam occurs when a farmer comes into the shop, angry at having hit a black man with his car, and having broken a lamp. It is at

this moment when Miriam starts questioning the regime she lives in. “Are black people really nothing? [...] Might that African not be hurt, or dead?” (p. 200). Not only did the African refuse her help, showing a deep anger, but also her husband hit her repeatedly, as a consequence. This episode clearly shows how Miriam is becoming less afraid of doing what she thinks it is right, despite the consequences. She is not a conformist anymore.

Another important change arises out of one of Amina’s ideas. Amina offers Miriam a job, working for her at the café, preparing Indian food. She is reluctant at first, and even though she refuses the offer, she accepts taking some driving lessons, taught by Amina herself. It is during the first lesson that they share their first kiss. It is right after this kiss that Miriam is able, for the first time, to confront her husband openly, and let him know that she knows about his affair with Farah. “It is I who should be angry with you.” (p.275).

It becomes evident that Miriam has deeply changed. She is not afraid of taking her own decisions, and is not the silent, obedient woman we found at the beginning of the novel. At the end, and as a culmination of her development, she decides to take the job, and informs her husband about it. He is completely against it, and shows an extremely aggressive behaviour, declaring that, as his wife, he will never allow her to work. The shock comes with Miriam’s calm but strong answer: “You want to divorce me?” (p.311). Omar, feeling defeated, has no other option but to accept the fact that her wife is not as she was before, and she will not accept mistreatment any longer.

I believe that even if her development is gradual, it goes really deep into her personality, and goes hand in hand with her relationship with Amina. Even though the ending is open, and readers cannot pin down what the future will bring for these two

women, the novel ends in a hopeful note. Miriam is not submissive with Amina as she was with her husband. This new, honest relationship gives her a new sense of identity, which allows her to rebel against the injustices that she sees around her. The enormous change in Miriam's personality is undeniable, as it is her rebellious attitude.

## 7 Conclusion

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*The World Unseen* successfully portrays an enormous diversity of characters, who deal differently with the oppressive system of Apartheid. It is undeniable that laws and social pressure strongly influence their behaviour. However, they show a wide spectrum of reactions. Some victims get resigned and accept their condition as unavoidable. This has proven to be the case, for example, of Jacob Williams. Others, instead, go one step further and perpetuate racist assumptions towards those whom they consider inferior. This attitude impregnates some members of the Indian community, as has been shown through Omar and even Farah.

Nevertheless, these attitudes are outshined by those who dare to rebel, challenging the status quo. Additionally, a repeating pattern can be observed in them. They may bear being mistreated, but they rebel when their loved ones or their relationships are at stake. This is shown, to a certain extent, by Jacob Williams, who wants to initiate a relationship with a white woman, Madeleine, even if he is not able to go all the way through. The relationship of Rehmat and James goes one step beyond, and they choose to leave their families, their lives and their country in order to live their love freely.

Last, and most obviously, we find the relationship between Miriam and Amina. Even if Miriam departs from being reasonably adapted to unfair circumstances, her relationship with Amina leads her to defy the conventions of the time, by having a homosexual relationship, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. Once an assumption is challenged, any other can be. As the relationship deepens, Miriam's personality develops, eventually taking control of her own life, making her own decisions and playing by her rules.

Therefore, a positive conclusion can be drawn. Powerful as the oppression may be, the need to fulfil love and desire is rooted deeper than fear in human souls. Injustice becomes unbearable when it gets in the path of relationships, and in such cases defiance to rules is to be expected. When injustice fails to trigger rebellion, desire may very well unleash the avalanche.

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