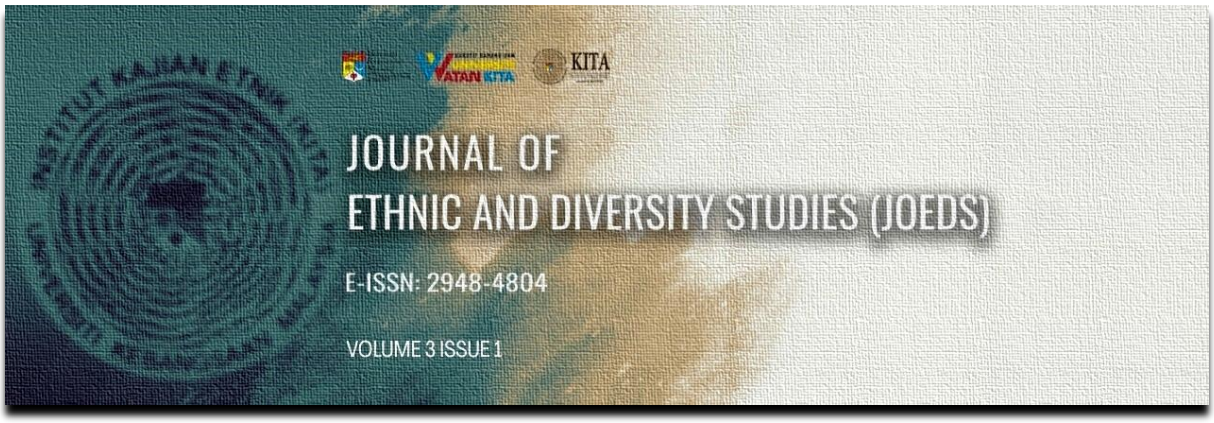

Multimedia Review: The Vulture and the Little Girl by Kevin Carter (1993)

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ABSTRACT

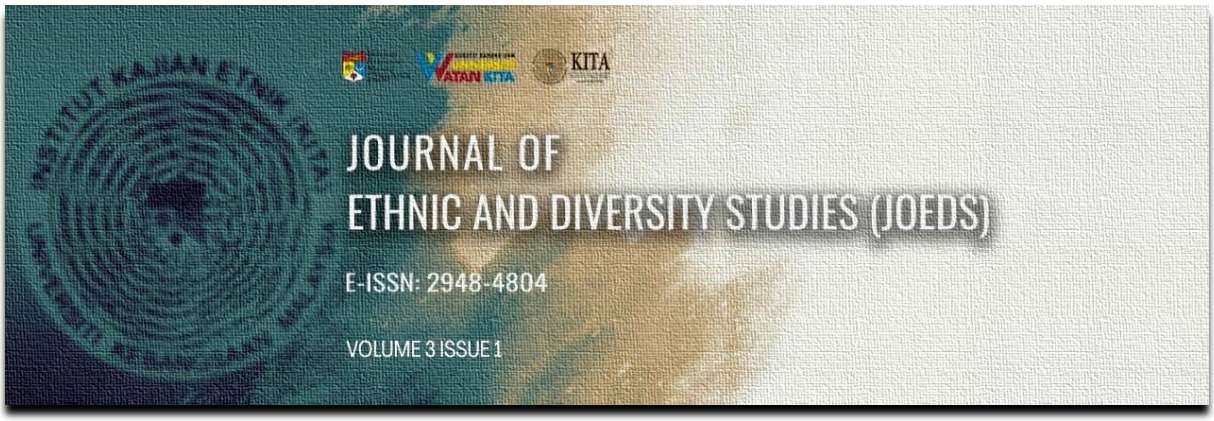
Some cultures of the world refuse to be photographed. They believe that a photograph takes more than just an image, it takes one's soul instead. The Vulture and Little Girl, a 1993 Pulitzer Prize winning photograph, depicts the story of Kevin Carter. Kevin Carter's photograph not only garnered him the Pulitzer Prize but also subjected him to widespread criticism for capturing the image without intervening to assist the child. This review explores Carter's photograph through sociological theories, including social stratification, conflict theory, modern sociological perspectives and the global failure to address such atrocities. It also uses the photograph as an epistemological tool to explore the visual composition and quality as artistic benchmarks, drawing comparisons with other iconic images to establish critical criteria in multimedia ethics, style, and social impact.

ABSTRAK

Sesetengah budaya dunia enggan diambil gambar. Mereka percaya bahawa gambar mengambil lebih daripada sekadar imej, sebaliknya ia memerlukan jiwa seseorang. The Vulture and Little Girl, gambar pemenang Hadiah Pulitzer 1993, menggambarkan kisah Kevin Carter. Gambar Kevin Carter, bukan sahaja meraihnya Hadiah Pulitzer tetapi juga menundukkannya kepada kritikan meluas kerana merakam imej itu tanpa campur tangan untuk membantu kanak-kanak itu. Kajian ini meneroka gambar Carter melalui teori sosiologi, termasuk stratifikasi sosial, teori konflik, perspektif sosiologi moden dan kegagalan global untuk menangani kekejaman tersebut. Ia juga menggunakan gambar sebagai alat epistemologi untuk meneroka komposisi visual dan kualiti sebagai penanda aras artistik, membuat perbandingan dengan imej ikonik lain untuk mewujudkan kriteria kritikal dalam etika multimedia, gaya dan impak sosial.

INTRODUCTION

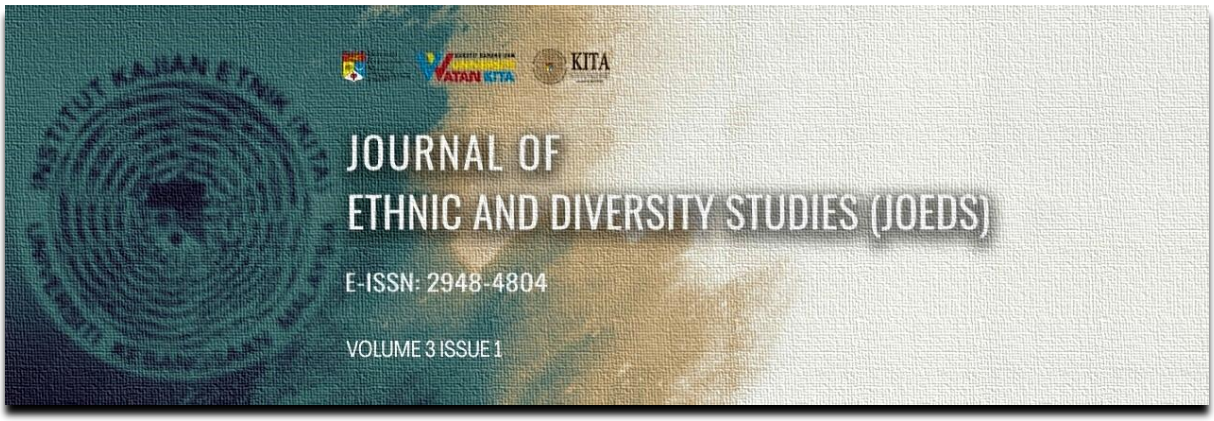
Some cultures of the world refuse to be photographed. They believe that a photograph takes more than just an image, it takes one's soul instead. *The Vulture and Little Girl* a 1993 Pulitzer Prize winning photograph, depicts the story of Kevin Carter. Kevin Carter's photograph, *The*



Vulture and the Little Girl, not only garnered him the Pulitzer Prize but also subjected him to widespread criticism for capturing the image without intervening to assist the child. This scrutiny, coupled with the haunting scenes he witnessed, weighed heavily on him, leading to his suicide just months after receiving the award (McCabe, 2014; MacLeod, 2001; Marinovich & Silva, 2000). This multimedia review reveals the real-life documentary, autobiography with an ontological stance of an individual's life journey in the quest of highlighting to the world of global humanitarianism, injustice, inequality, systemic neglect, real-life lived experience of structural violence, human suffering, and the ethics of photojournalism. This is more than just a still image. It is a haunting snapshot that has stirred emotional and ethical discussion within the realms of sociology. Captured in famine-stricken Sudan, the image became an enduring visual metaphor of social injustice, particularly ethnicity, class stratification and capitalism within the context of apartheid and post-colonial South Africa. The photograph portrays a starving child collapsed on the ground, watched closely by a single lurking vulture.

This review explores Carter's photograph through sociological theories, including social stratification, conflict theory, modern sociological perspectives and the global failure to address such atrocities. It also uses the photograph as an epistemological tool to explore the visual composition and quality as artistic benchmarks, drawing comparisons with other iconic images to establish critical criteria in multimedia ethics, style, and social impact. While The Vulture and the Little Girl directly portrays famine in Sudan, its broader implications evoke the legacies of colonial exploitation, such as slavery and systemic inequality, particularly evident in postcolonial African societies like South Africa (Worden, 2012; Rodney, 1972). Exploitation, inequality and conflict are the three ingredients of colonialism from Europe which tore apart the social and economic fabric of South Africa. South Africa shared the European practise of forcing native Africans into slavery. Slavery is a problem that greatly influenced Africa as a continent and many of its problems can be linked to it. Slavery was common practise at that time and Dutch settlers needed workers. Fundamentally, they used slaves to manage their properties and enterprises. Some of these slaves originated from South Africa and nearby countries. The fact that the slaves were not white or European was the only thing they had in common. Without a pass, slaves were not permitted to leave their workplace. Poor nutrition, overcrowding, corporal punishment and the ban on marriage all applied to them. If they did have children, they were kept as slaves permanently and became the property of the slave owners.

As soon as slavery was outlawed, settled farmers fled the nation since it was no longer profitable to use slave labour (Sontag, 2003: Silva, 1994). Although The Vulture and the Little Girl captures a moment from the Sudanese famine, the sociological weight of the image can be connected to the broader African experience of colonial exploitation and racialized violence. In South Africa, British imperial interests in diamonds and gold led to the displacement of indigenous populations and entrenched racial hierarchies (Pakenham, 1991; Fredrickson, 1981). These dynamics later manifested in violent state suppression during apartheid, including

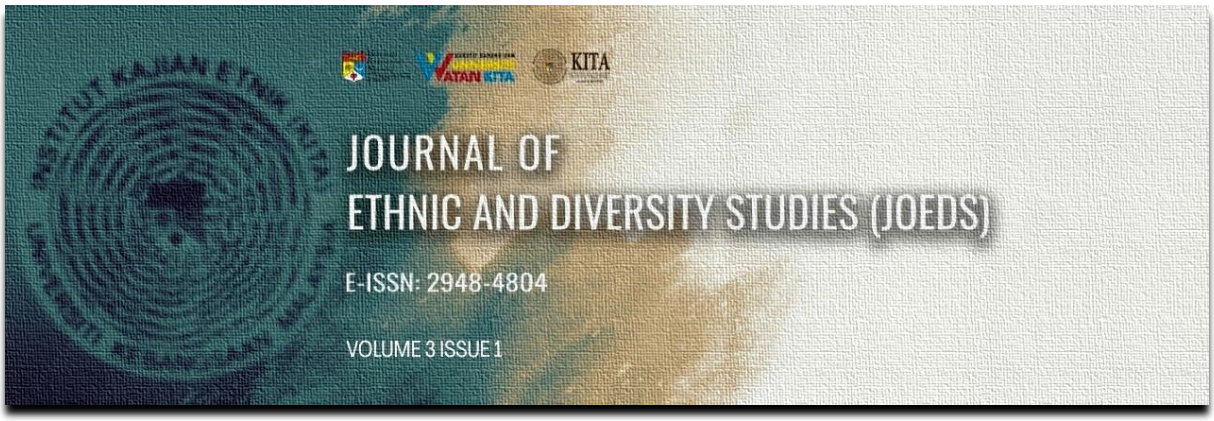


the deployment of death squads (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998). British forces invaded and overthrew the ruling sons of soil indigenous population in order to acquire the resources. Thereafter, it would become an independent state for a few decades but one that nevertheless carried the legacy of earlier colonial authority, the notion that people of colour were inferior to their white European counterparts. These factors, led to protracted Civil Wars. Hardworking Africans from lower social classes opposed the state and fought for the same legal protections and rights as their colonial citizens. The South African government sent out death squads to literally patrol the streets and assassinate people throughout the 1980s (Mamdani, 1996). The sociological paradigm which explains apartheid policy of segregation and discrimination on grounds of race and ethnicity will be best explained by *The Conflict Theory* of Karl Marx.

KEVIN CARTER: A LIFE FRAMED BY CONSCIENCE AND CONFLICT

Kevin Carter's lived experience under apartheid deeply shaped his moral compass. Born into a white middle-class family in Johannesburg, he was disturbed by the racial violence he saw from a young age (O'Laughlin, 1994). He often questioned his parents, wondering how a Catholic, liberal family could accept such systemic cruelty as fair or just. Initially aspiring to become a chemist after high school, Carter eventually abandoned his academic pursuits and was conscripted into the South African Defence Force. His time in the South African Defence Force further intensified his ethical turmoil especially after defending a *Black* waiter from ridicule, for which he was violently attacked and labelled a *kaffir boetie* a derogatory term meaning *Nigger* lover. (Marinovich & Silva, 2000; Nachtwey et al., 1994). Traumatised and disillusioned, Carter went absent without leave (AWOL) and attempted to become a radio DJ. It's a military term used when a soldier leaves their post or duty without official permission. He was eventually captured and forced to complete his military conscription. In 1983, Carter witnessed the aftermath of the Church Street bombing in Pretoria. This event became a turning point in his life.

Disillusioned by the heavily biased media portrayal, which painted only the narrative of police victimhood while ignoring the deeper context of oppression, Carter resolved to pursue photojournalism. He sought to tell the stories that mainstream media often omitted, those of the oppressed, the brutalised, and the forgotten. While national coverage focused on images of *Black South Africans* clashing with authorities, Carter turned his lens toward the source of their anguish: the cruelty of apartheid, the systematic abuse, and the existential violence that compelled such resistance. One of the most horrific practices he documented was *necklacing*, a brutal form of execution inflicted on collaborators and informants. Victims would have a tire forced over their torso, immobilizing their arms, before being doused with petrol and set alight. Carter was the first to photograph this atrocity. Although he felt morally conflicted, he believed that capturing such events was vital to awakening the world to South Africa's deepening human



crisis. He later admitted that the emotional toll of witnessing and documenting such violence began to erode him.

Still, he hoped his images might urge international leaders to pressure oppressive regimes into ending segregation, especially in the context of the emerging Fourth Industrial Revolution.

> *"I was appalled at what they were doing. I was appalled at what I was doing. But then people started talking about those pictures... then I felt maybe my actions hadn't been all that bad."* (attributed to Kevin Carter, Kumar, 2022)

This quote reveals the duality of Carter's inner world: part documentarian, part empath, constantly questioning whether his work illuminated atrocities or inadvertently sensationalized them. He feared that media attention might actually fuel the violence by making it performative.

> *"After having seen so many necklacing's on the news, it occurred to me that either many others were being performed off camera or that the presence of the camera completed the last requirement and acted as a catalyst in this terrible reaction... The strong message that was being sent was only meaningful if it were carried by the media. The question that haunts me is: would those people have been necklaced if there was no media coverage?"* (attributed to Kevin Carter, Wikipedia, n.d.)

This chilling reflection highlights the ethical quagmire photojournalists face where the act of witnessing can become a force in shaping the event itself. Over time, Carter would photograph many African war zones, documenting the aftermath of political instability and violence across the continent. However, one country in particular would weigh heavily on his conscience: Sudan. In March 1993, the United Nations invited a group of photojournalists to raise global awareness about the famine ravaging the country. Carter was among them. Initially photographing at a feeding station, he wandered off after hearing the faint whimper of a child. There, he encountered the scene that would define his legacy: a severely malnourished child, curled over in exhaustion, while a vulture loomed ominously in the background. Carter waited, hoping the vulture would spread its wings for a more dramatic shot. When it didn't, he took several photographs and then shooed the bird away. The resulting image was harrowing. A frozen moment of desolation, starvation, and silent predation. After taking the photo, Carter reportedly walked to a nearby tree, lit a cigarette, and wept. He later said the only thing he could think of was hugging his daughter. Despite its power, the image raised immediate ethical questions: *Did the child survive? Why didn't you help her?* These inquiries haunted Carter.

> *"It may be difficult for people to understand, but as a photojournalist, my first instinct was to make the photograph. As soon as that job was done and the child moved on, I*

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> *felt completely devastated. I think I tried to pray; I tried to talk to God to assure Him that if He got me out of this place I would change my life."* (Kevin Carter, NPR.org, 2006).

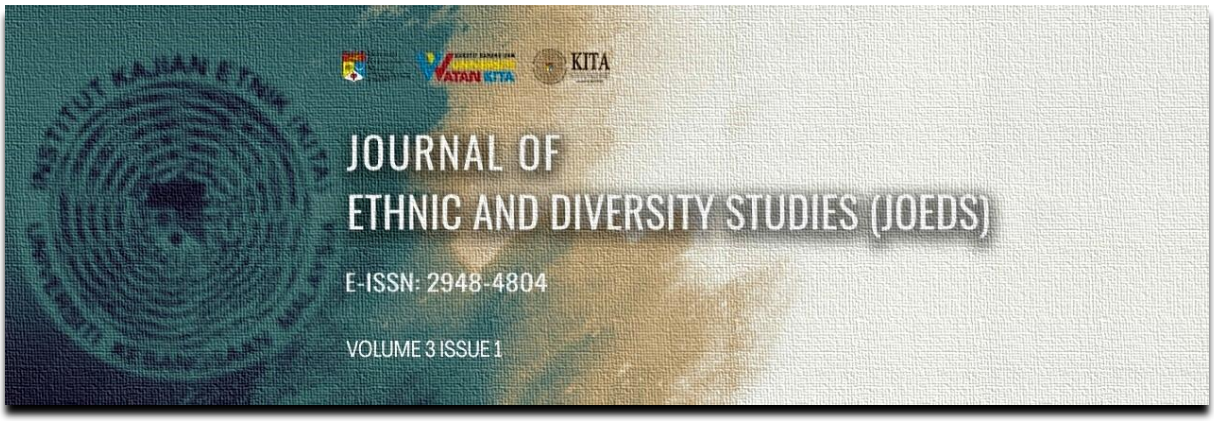
Importantly, few members of the public understood that photojournalists, especially in crisis zones, are often prohibited from interacting with their subjects to prevent the spread of disease or interference with humanitarian operations. Carter was instructed not to touch or assist famine victims. Furthermore, the photo's framing was misleading. The vulture, estimated to be about 20 meters away, was not stalking the child. In fact, there were other vultures just outside the frame, feeding on nearby waste. The child, identified by a feeding station wristband had already been registered for aid, and her parents were likely nearby. Years later, the child's family confirmed the child was a boy named Kong Nyong. He survived the famine but tragically died in 2007 from malaria. Despite winning the Pulitzer Prize for the photograph in April 1994, the emotional toll on Carter was overwhelming. On July 27, 1994 just two months later, Kevin Carter died by suicide. In his final note, he wrote:

> *"I'm really, really sorry. The pain of life overrides the joy to the point that joy does not exist… I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain… of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners… I have gone to join Ken, if I am that lucky."* (attributed to Kevin Carter, Harvard University Asia Center, 1999)

Carter's story is a tragic testament to the burden borne by those who seek to expose injustice through the lens of a camera. His life and work continue to provoke deep ethical questions: Can bearing witness justify inaction? Does documenting suffering absolve us, or implicate us further? And most crucially, at what cost do we preserve truth?

PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION AND AESTHETIC ANALYSIS

Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl* is not only a haunting document of famine and human despair but also a highly calculated and powerful composition rooted in visual storytelling. Through a nuanced orchestration of photographic principles such as the rule of thirds, tonal contrast, spatial arrangement, and symbolic framing, the image communicates emotional and moral urgency beyond its surface. The rule of thirds is employed with precision, placing the emaciated child in the lower left intersection of the frame and the vulture in the upper right. This diagonal tension creates a dynamic interplay between vulnerability and predation, guiding the viewer's gaze across the visual plane and constructing a silent narrative of helplessness and threat (Arnheim 1974). According to Briot (2010), strong composition necessitates of balance, leading lines, contrast and emotional gravity, are also present in Carter's work. The vast negative space surrounding the subjects amplifies the child's isolation.

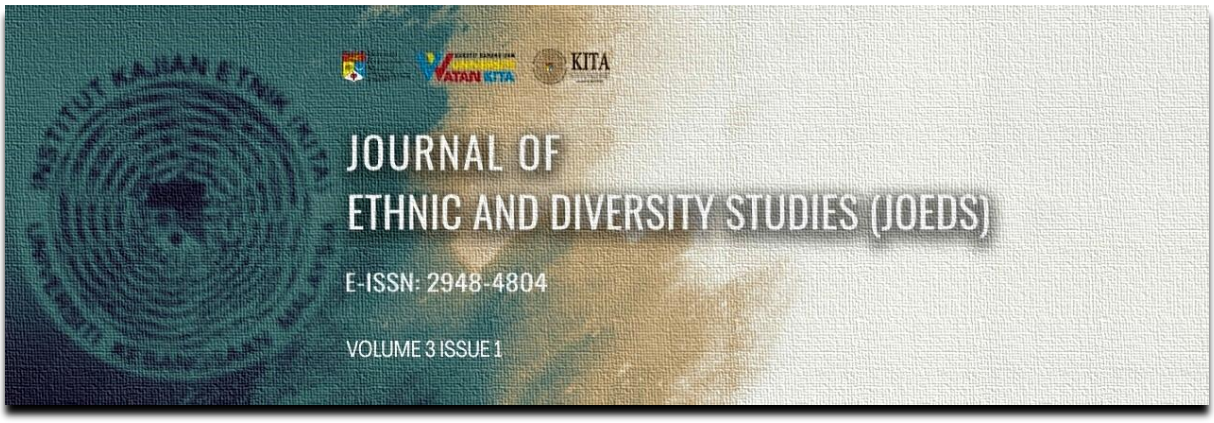


As Koffka (1935) emphasized in Gestalt theory, humans interpret the whole before its parts. The barrenness of the environment creates a psychological void, one that symbolically mirrors the absence of aid, compassion or intervention. The stark spatial emptiness evokes a profound sense of global detachment, compelling viewers to confront their humanitarian responsibility, a visual technique often used in conflict photography to provoke emotional and moral introspection (Sontag, 2003; Zelizer, 2010).

Meanwhile, tonally the image is characterised by a stark contrast between light and shadow. The skeletal figure of the child and the textured plumage of the vulture are accentuated by natural lighting that dramatizes every contour and crack in the earth. These elements are not just visually arresting, they operate semiotically as well (Barthes 1977) symbolizing the extremity of suffering and the spectre of death that hovers within the composition. Whilst, from a psychological perspective, the posture of the child collapsed and seemingly lifeless invokes the phenomenon of learned helplessness (Seligman 1975), reflecting how chronic adversity can paralyze action and agency. The implied motion of the vulture, cautiously approaching yet suspended in the background, introduces narrative ambiguity. Invoke a question, is it simply a bird, or a metaphor for exploitative systems and social abandonment? Framing choices also play a critical role. Carter intentionally excludes any surrounding human presence, despite later admissions that aid workers were nearby. This omission creates a more intense and focused composition that enhances the viewer's emotional response but also raises ethical questions about constructed narratives in photojournalism (Zelizer, 2010; Marinovich & Silva, 2000). As Sontag (2003) suggests, aestheticizing suffering can provoke both empathy and apathy. It confronts viewers while simultaneously implicating them in voyeuristic consumption. Ultimately, the strength of Carter's photograph lies not only in its content but in the deliberate visual architecture that supports its meaning. It is a masterclass in affective composition where technical choices serve to enhance emotional resonance, sociological symbolism and moral provocation.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND GLOBAL INEQUALITY

The photograph depicts the child as the marginalised Sudanese communities and the vulture symbolises the predatory nature of global capitalism. Carter's photograph highlights social stratification at its most extreme where famine, conflict, and historical exploitation intersect. Giddens and Sutton (2013) describe stratification as the hierarchical layering of society based on class, race, or other status markers. The image encapsulates a social world where individuals are structurally denied basic human needs. It echoes the legacy of colonialism and slavery in Africa, as discussed in the accompanying narrative: slaves were stripped of dignity, autonomy, and opportunity, much like the modern-day child in the photo, reduced to a symbol of a failing global system. Robertson (1992) contextualizes this within globalisation theory, asserting that systemic inequalities are perpetuated through unequal economic relations. The photograph serves as a powerful visual representation of the extreme poverty faced by individuals in sub-



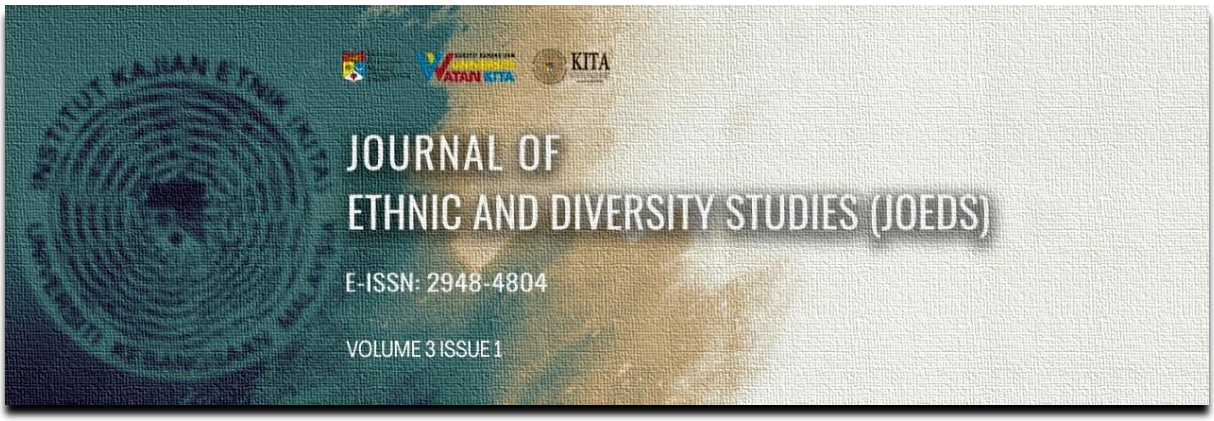
Saharan Africa, particularly in war-torn Sudan, as shown in the backdrop of the child's suffering. The child's vulnerability and the haunting presence of the vulture suggest a broader, systemic failure in addressing poverty and inequality on a global scale, drawing attention to the impacts of international neglect.

CONFLICT THEORY AND CAPITALIST CRITIQUE

Karl Marx conceptualized society as a system of social relationships fundamentally rooted in economics, with capitalism and modes of production serving as the primary determinants of major social forces. He argued that the history of human society is predominantly shaped by economic conflict, resulting in the formation of two antagonistic social classes: the bourgeoisie (the white capitalist elites or owners) and the proletariat (the indigenous labouring class). According to Marx, conflict emerges when the proletariat becomes aware of the exploitative tactics employed by the bourgeoisie to maximize profits through cheap labour. This realisation, Marx posited, would eventually catalyse a proletarian revolution aimed at dismantling the capitalist system and replacing it with a more equitable socialist structure. This revolutionary upheaval took the form of violent resistance such as *necklacing*, a gruesome but symbolic act of protest against those seen as collaborators of the oppressive regime. Marx's ontological perspective views the world as inherently unstable, driven by the inevitable transition of control over resources from capitalist to socialist systems. Epistemologically, Marx's conflict theory grounded in scientific realism offers a lens through which to uncover the hidden realities and causal mechanisms underpinning social exploitation and inequality.

The capitalist practices implemented by the European ruling class in South Africa marginalised and oppressed the indigenous population, intensifying social stratification. According to Marx, capitalism is destined to collapse and be superseded by socialism. Yet, despite the theoretical inevitability of its demise, capitalism remains a dominant global system. Nevertheless, Marx's predictions have materialised in various contexts such as South Africa, Sudan, Libya, Iraq, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Philippines, and more recently, Malaysia where social consciousness and resistance movements have challenged capitalist structures. Marx maintained that class consciousness would ultimately lead to societal transformation. Once individuals become aware of their exploitation, they are compelled to rise up and dismantle the systems that oppress them. In this regard, Carter's photograph, serves as a poignant visual critique of capitalist apathy. Marx's conflict theory (Ritzer & Goodman, 2000) is indispensable for interpreting the power dynamics represented in this image. The image functions as both a testament to human suffering and a powerful catalyst for revolution and social change, aligning with Marx's belief that awareness of injustice is the first step toward liberation.

The vulture is capitalism and the child is proletariat. The photograph metaphorically stages the exploitative relationship between oppressor and oppressed. As Chan and Aboo (2018) explain, stratification systems are maintained not merely through legal frameworks but



cultural narratives. Images like Carter's disrupt these narratives by making suffering visible. Furthermore, the image supports Marx's prediction: exploitation breeds resistance. Carter's photograph act as a documentation of activism through art. Similar to Mandela's resistance or Sudanese uprisings, became part of a broader push against hegemonic power structures.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN PHOTOJOURNALISM

The ethical debate surrounding Carter's actions is well documented. While the child survived, critics accused Carter of exploitation. His suicide two months after winning the Pulitzer highlights the psychological toll of bearing witness without intervention. Fulcher and Scott (2011) stress that media must balance documentation with empathy. Yet photojournalists often face institutional constraints: interacting with subjects can contaminate scenes or violate health protocols. In Carter's own words:

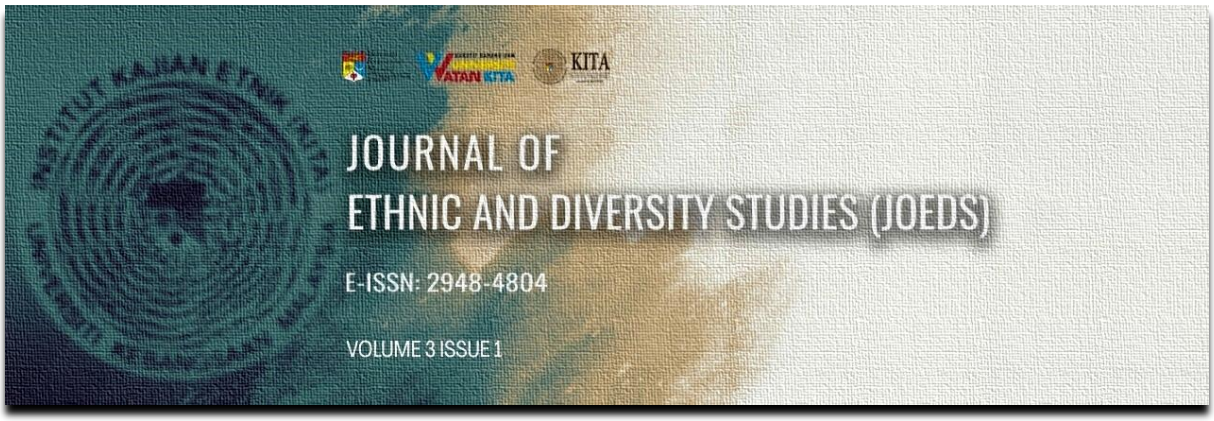
> *"I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses...of starving or wounded children"* (attributed to Kevin Carter, Harvard University Asia Center, 1999)

The phrase reveals an epistemological crisis: is documenting suffering sufficient, or is it complicit? These reflections challenge photojournalists and consumers alike to interrogate their roles in a media-saturated world. As documented, Carter was prohibited from touching famine victims for fear of disease transmission. Furthermore, photojournalistic ethics dictate non-intervention in order to preserve the objectivity of reportage. However, this rule is fraught with moral complexity. This reveals a paradox in visual media ethics: when does observation become complicity? As Carter himself questioned, was the vulture merely in the photo or was it, in fact, the photographer himself?

COMPARATIVE ICONOGRAPHY AND BENCHMARKING

In terms of iconic status, *The Vulture and the Little Girl* is often compared to other historic photographs such as Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* (1972), Eddie Adams's *Saigon Execution* (1968), and Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936). Each shares key benchmarks: emotional intensity, historical resonance, symbolic imagery, and wide dissemination. The criteria used for comparison include:

- Narrative Depth – The story behind the image (Briot, 2010).
- Symbolism – Representation of broader societal conditions.
- Emotive Power – The ability to provoke public discourse.
- Ethical Complexity – Moral questions raised by the image's creation or dissemination.
- Legacy – Enduring impact on society, policy, and culture.



Carter's photograph stands among the most influential, serving as a benchmark in photojournalism education and media ethics debates. As the saying goes, *a picture is worth a thousand words*, highlights the power of visual communication. A single still photograph conveyed complex ideas and emotions effectively as compared to a detailed verbal description. Similar to a famous quote by Mahatma Gandhi, *even a single lamp dispels the deepest darkness*. Carter's vision through his lens, envisioned the humankinds future undertakings.

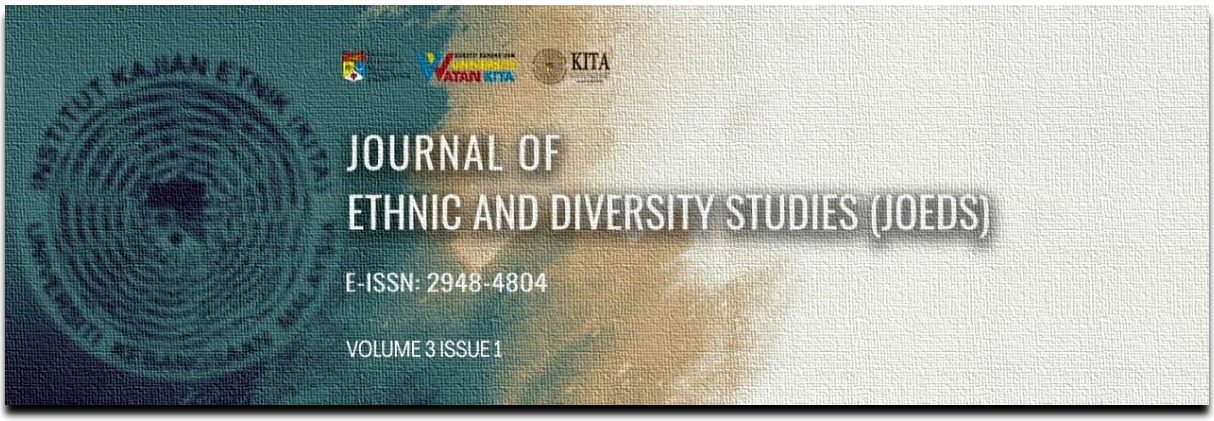
NEWER SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS AND MEDIA STUDIES

Contemporary research in visual sociology and digital media ethics has added layers of interpretation. Chan, Edo, and Hussain (2016) argue that visual culture, especially in multilingual and multicultural societies, serves as a field of honour for identity and representation. With the rise of social media, photos like Carter's are now rapidly disseminated and recontextualized, often stripped of background, creating new ethical dilemmas.

Shamsul (2017) further highlights the *top-down* vs. *bottom-up* approaches to social integration. While Carter's image originated from a top-down UN intervention, its grassroots impact was substantial, prompting global awareness and reshaping public sentiment about African crises. As the Fourth Industrial Revolution continues, integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and social media, such multimedia documentation must navigate the fine line between advocacy and commodification of suffering.

CONCLUSION

Through witnessing, analysing, and reflecting on Kevin Carter's life journey, I have come to deeply understand the devastating effects of systemic social segregation. The apartheid injustice in South Africa, like other forms of institutionalised inequality enforced by the dominant social class upon the oppressed, inevitably sows the seeds of revolution. Marx's *Conflict Theory* is profoundly validated in this context. Social segregation and class stratification lead to the emergence of class consciousness, which, in turn, culminates in violent resistance and the eventual uprising of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. This dynamic was epitomized in South Africa through the eventual liberation of Nelson Mandela, a lower-class activist and anti-apartheid leader who was imprisoned for 27 years. His release in 1990 marked the beginning of the end for the apartheid regime and ushered in a new era of peace and reconciliation in a racially and ethnically divided nation. Mandela's leadership not only transformed South Africa but also ignited global movements in the pursuit of justice and human rights. On April 20, 1964, Mandela delivered his iconic three-hour speech, *I Am Prepared to Die*, during his trial for sabotage as the leader of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress. His words continue to resonate across generations, capturing the spirit of resilience, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to justice:



> *"It always seems impossible until it's done. Many people in this country have paid the price before me, and many will pay the price after me. Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again. Money won't create success, the freedom to make it will. Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."* (quote attributed to Nelson Mandela, McKenna, A., n.d.)

This academic reflection seeks to explore the enduring relevance of injustice and inequality in society, particularly as it relates to class oppression, race, and the power of visual documentation. *The Vulture and the Little Girl* is not just a still photo, it is a mirror to humanity's failures and a call for a global moral action. Hence, Kevin Carter's photograph continues to educate through pain, truth, and empathy. His life is his message.

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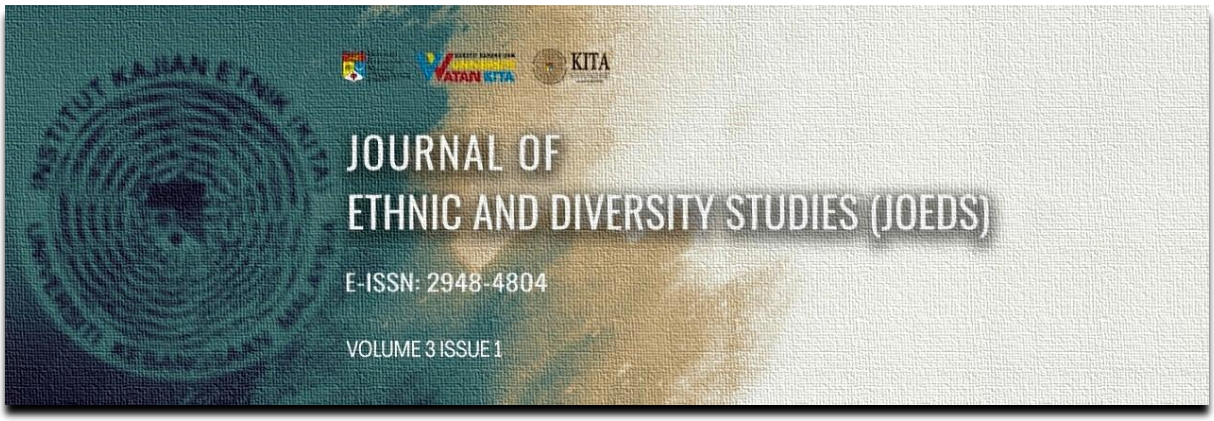

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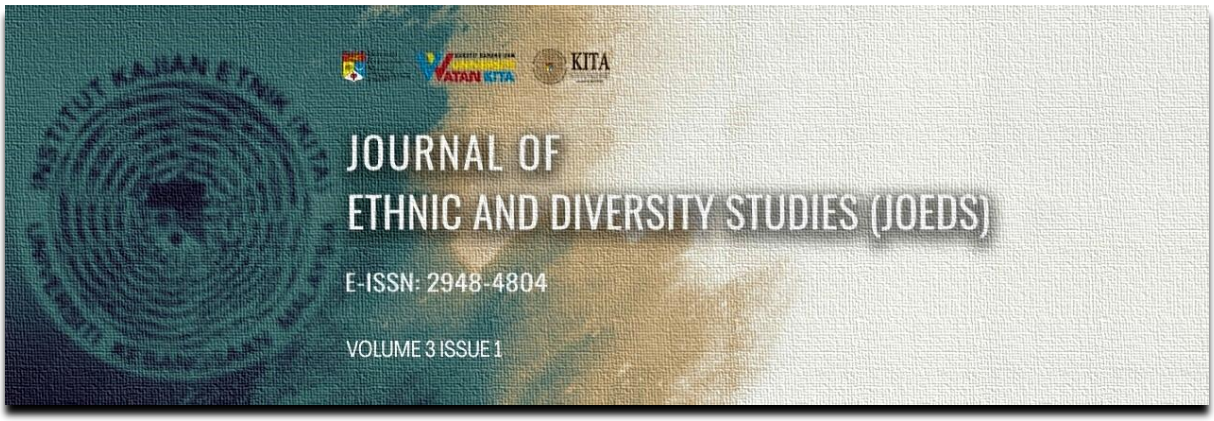

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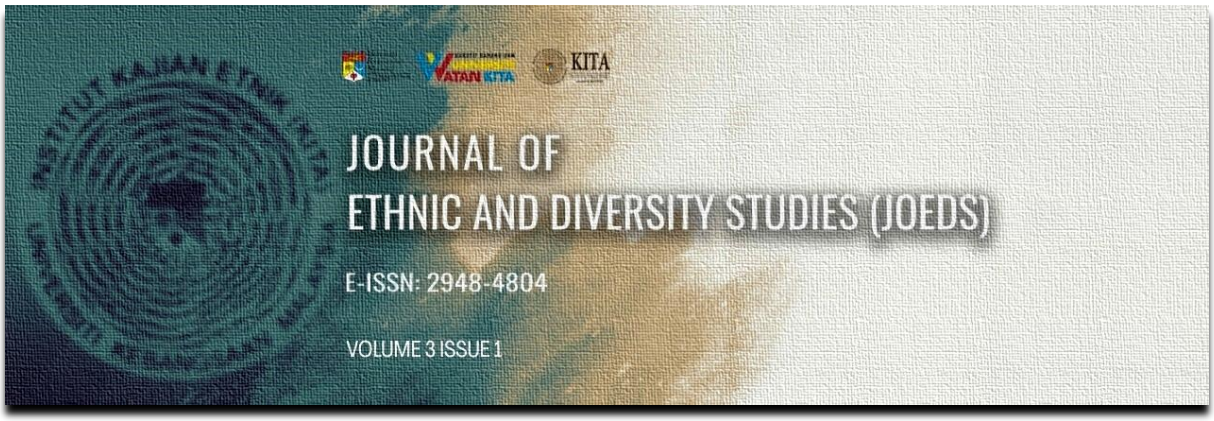

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