

## Relationship Between Race and Identity: A Study of Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*

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### Abstract

**Aims:** *The present paper sheds light on the representation of Black identity construction amid systemic discrimination, violence, and social norms. The Hate U Give (2017) dives deeper into the complexities of race and identity by examining social activism within the framework of systemic oppression.*

**Methodology and Approaches:** *The character of Starr Carter illustrates how she grapples with supporting the dual identities of a white private school and a Black community. Mobilizing concepts of race, identity, voice, personal experience, culture, and social imagination, this paper observes how individual consciousness is formed and impacted through racism.*

**Outcome:** *The study illuminates how these concepts are integrated into the processes of identity politics within an oppressive society.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *The study finds that the novel approaches self-actualization, racial injustice, and activism from new directions in African American literature and provides fresh views on the debates of these issues.*

**Keywords:** Black Racism, Identity Formation, Systemic Violence, African American Activism, Identity Politics, Literature, Dual Personality, Race and Society.

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The issue of race and identity has continued to be a dominant motif in Afro-American literature, often illustrating experiences of discrimination and oppression within America's social and historical context. Thomas' *The Hate U Give* is a modern example of literature that deals with this issue through the problems of a black teenager, Starr Carter, who struggles with issues of race in a fragmented society. The novel deals with the consequences of racial stereotypes, violence against people of color, and social movements on identity and nationalism.

Starr's story can be used to discuss how race affects personal identity and a sense of belonging to a community. Starr faces the issue of code-switching to fit into two worlds as she lives in a black neighborhood and goes to a white private school. This self-identity struggle poses the question of how much a person is a product of social constructs vis-à-vis their own identity. The paper analyses the race and identity correlation in *The Hate U Give*, relating how the lead character's

life reflects the life of the African American population in general. This study tries to tackle the issue of identity within an oppressive framework through racial awareness, cultural heritage or lack of it, and defiant acts. Additionally, the novel underscores the importance of activism for self-identity, which adds to the existing debate about ethnicity, justice, and self-identity construct.

The paper explains pathways of how race and identity relate to African American literature, focusing on racism and self-image as a defining characteristic of identity. In this regard, Thomas's work, *The Hate U Give* (2017), helps in understanding the thoughts of Black adolescents enduring multi-layered identity challenges. Bell Hooks (1993) and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) discussed in Thomas's work the assimilation of Black identity in opposition to historical and cultural subjugation. The scholarship that has been done on Thomas's work is mostly about how he describes racial violence and discrimination with the use of the police force.

Mahoney, Joseph L., et al. (2021) argues that the book has become a discourse for the #BlackLivesMatter movement in trying to make sense of racism today. Also, Brooks, James E., Linda M. Ly, and Shabnam E. Brady (2021) study how Starr Carter, the main character, has to construct her identity as a black girl who lives in a predominately white neighborhood. This sociological phenomenon captures his idea of a "double consciousness," which was formulated by Karenga, Maulana (2003) and is still applicable to today's social realities. In addition, the issues of voice and resistance in the life of the child have been discussed as important aspects of social identity.

According to Mikuls, Ted R., et al (2021), Starr's journey towards self-empowerment is a form of reclaiming power from systemic silencing. Other scholars have also studied the novel's influence on young adult literature and emphasized its contributions to raising issues of racial consciousness and activism (Walker, Chloe J., et al, 2022). By integrating these views, this analysis seeks to

enhance comprehension concerning race and identity in *The Hate U Give* in relation to the larger issues of representation, counter-discourse, and self-imagination in African American literature.

*The Hate U Give*, along with other contemporary African American literature, offers insightful commentary on the complex interactions of race and identity. Authors such as Angie Thomas, Jesmyn Ward, and Ta-Nehisi Coates interrogate the ways in which racial categories affect self and collective definitions. Their creative expressions speak to the continued contestation of systemic racism, social injustice, and cultural exclusion, which reflects how Black people define themselves in oppressive conditions. Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* is a novel that captures this discourse. It features Starr Carter, an adolescent black girl who struggles with her multiple identities in a very divided society. Starr was very upset and angry and it is shown in the following passage:

... pretend the ball is some fried chicken." "Lighten up! It was only game talk." "A fried chicken joke was only game talk? Really?" I ask. "Her eyes widen. Oh my God. You think I was being racist?" "... You made a fried chicken comment to the only black girl in the room. You can say something racist and not be a racist! (Thomas, 32)

The hereditary life Starr has lived recalls W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness," meaning African Americans live in perpetual conflict with themselves, the consequence of their identity as humans distributed into two; one component is based on their Black culture and the other on their being primarily White American. This phenomenon is most apparent in Starr's case when she has to straddle the boundary line of her underprivileged Black community neighborhood and her private elite school that caters to whites. Her experience sums up most of the difficulty of code-switching, a technique many Blacks have had to employ in order to exist in environments that either do not accept them as Blacks or tend to fetishize their skin color.

In relating her novel to racial injustices of the modern world, Thomas consolidates the legacy from the art of *The Hate You Give*. This makes her work an important piece in performing the armature of African American literature. Moreover, the book addresses internal and external community relations as essential components of an identity. Starr's neighborhood, Garden Heights, is an example of an ethnic group with a distinct cultural history and a tradition of being united and standing together. Starr in her two different worlds has different identities and personalities. She is two different persons. She has realized that since her sleep home party in the seventh grade with her two best friends. It is stated from her thoughts in the following sentences:

Hailey didn't come. Her dad didn't want her spending the night in "the ghetto" I overheard my parents say that. Maya came but ended up asking her parents to come get her that night. There was a drive-by around the corner, and the gunshots scared her. That's when I realized Williamson is one world and Garden Heights is another, and I have to keep them separate. (21)

This portrayal not only moves beyond the predominant black stereotypes but underlines the significance of culture as a source of identity. Within the context of modern African American literature, *The Hate U Give* is an example of how storytelling transforms and problematizes racial experiences in America. The book illustrates that identity is highly dynamic and is formed through one's experiences, historical context, and politics. The wide embrace of the novel, especially among the youth, is a clear indication of its ability to shape discussions around race, justice, and identity. The central debates in contemporary African American literature appear to be the questions of race and identity, which are best represented by writers such as Angie Thomas, who focus on and experience the life of a Black person in America firsthand.

Starr exists in a dichotomy of two worlds: the largely Black neighborhood of Garden Heights and the elitist, predominantly White private school, Williamson Prep. Each of these settings requires her to act in different ways. In Garden Heights, she experiences a sense of belonging to her roots but confronts violence, poverty, and neglect. For Williamson Prep, she alters her mannerisms and language to escape the label of the “angry Black girl.” These contradictions lead her to compartmentalize her identity, hide parts of herself that are ostracized, and walk on eggshells around spaces that monitor her every move. Starr’s is a struggle many Black people face when encountering white institutions, spaces that are unapologetically devoid of any attempts to accommodate Black culture or heritage. Thomas observes:

The drug dealer. That’s how they see him. It doesn’t matter that he’s suspected of doing it. “Drug dealer” is louder than “suspected” ever will be if it’s revealed that I was in the car, what will that make me? The thug ghetto girl with the drug dealer? What will my teachers think about me? My friends? The whole fucking world, possibly? (Thomas 70)

The novel articulates how systemic racism influences Starr’s self-image. The police shooting of her childhood friend, Khalil, catalyzes her self-awakening. While Starr is reluctant to speak out due to perceived retaliation and social consequences, she slowly comes to understand that silence only worsens injustice. Her choice to testify and advocate for Khalil marks a pivotal point in her life’s self-actualization. It signifies her dismantling of the internalized fragmentation of her identity stemming from donor persona concealment and, instead, reclaiming unapologetic black consciousness. Through this shift, Thomas critiques the extent to which already marginalized people are made to assimilate without losing their identity.

Starr’s journey toward selfhood intersects with the novel’s conception of racial injustice. Her transition from silence to activism demonstrates the need to

reclaim a sense of identity that has been stripped away due to systemic oppression. Thomas depicts Starr not solely as someone grappling with issues of racial identity but as someone who embodies Black resistance and agency. By the end of the book, Starr becomes more assertive and even starts to embrace her identity instead of hiding it for someone else's ease. *The Hate U Give* captures the emotional consequences of trying to maintain two identities while also advocating for embracing one's ethnicity and culture. Starr Carter's fight for selfhood illustrates the veteran complexities of Black identity in a society that seeks to homogenize divergence into one singular, unfaltering identity.

*The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas powerfully critiques systemic racism and police violence and the effects of this violence on social identity construction. The narrative violence experienced by Starr Carter, the protagonist of the novel, reveals the stark reality of violence and discrimination deeply embedded within the frameworks of self-concept and social relations encompassing Black identity. This part evaluates, within the context of systemic racism, how bodily harm of police brutality intersects with conscious acts of defining identity and self, as well as agency, in a racially organized society.

Systemic racism functions as an organized form of ethnic discrimination enabled through laws, policies, and social customs that infringe on Black people's lives. The novel highlights this by portraying the police shooting of Khalil, Starr's childhood friend, as a turning point that propels Starr toward a greater understanding of her race. Starr is caught between two worlds – her Black neighborhood of Garden Heights and the predominantly white private school she attends. However, Khalil's wrongful death makes it impossible for Starr to remain oblivious to the realities of structural violence, and she is compelled to accept her Blackness more wholeheartedly. The author observes:

Khalil grabs my hand “C’mom.” There are way too many people and way too much curly hair for me to catch a glimpse of Kenya, “But Kenya-”

“Forget her, let’s go!” He pulls me through the crowd, shoving people out our way and stepping on shoes. That alone could get us some bullets. I look for Kenya among the panicked faces, but still no sign of her. I don’t try to see who got shot or who did it. You can’t snitch if you don’t know anything. (Thomas, 14)

The police violence in *The Hate U Give* serves, both literally and metaphorically, as an infliction to the existence and humanity of black lives. The media’s depiction of Khalil, the community’s paranoia of police vengeance, and Starr’s muted quest for justice all represent the psychological turmoil that comes with enduring racial trauma. Starr grapples with the social and personal consequences of being the sole eyewitness to Khalil’s execution, which results in her trepidation to step forward. This specific fear captures the essence of the erasure of black identity that comes with systemic oppression, which continues, time and again, to mutilate the selfhood of blacks. As Starr learns to voice her opinions, she transforms into a powerful advocate for justice, which demonstrates the paradox that one comes to embrace one’s racial identity through confrontations of injustice.

Moreover, the novel critiques how systemic racism assassinates Khalil’s essence as Blackness by posthumously depicting him in a negative light. The police and media, instead of recognizing the fundamental injustice of his death, seek to rationalize the shooting by depicting him as a gang member or a drug dealer. This encapsulates the dominant societal narratives that disregard the value of Black lives while perpetuating identities that shatter black selfhood. The community actively challenges the identity-shattering narratives fostered by systemic oppression through collective action in the form of protests and activism. In this light, the community’s opposition functions as an identity-affirming counter-narrative that reclaims identity as Black. Starr reclaiming her identity through speaking out against police violence authenticates the exercise of

dominion—individual and collective—over imposed narratives that seek to structure Black identity within hierarchical systems of control. In his book, *Racism, Crime and Justice* (2002), Benjamin Bowling asserts:

Discrimination consists of unequal, unfavorable and unjustifiable treatment based on a person's sex, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, class, sexual preference, age, physical disability or any improper ground. It includes refusal to offer employment, pay fair wages, to provide housing or medical treatment or to provide a commercial or social service. It can also take the form of harassment, attack, exclusion and expulsion. (38).

The racial identity is a matter of individual choice as much as it is of collective identity woven through the enduring battle against systemic racism. Through Starr, the novel illustrates that to accept racial injustice is to deliberately, consciously, and emphatically negate one's identity as a Black person. In highlighting these issues, this research demonstrates why the novel demands attention in today's conversations about race, justice, and self-definition.

Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* stands out as an eloquent representation of the intricate connection intertwining race identity and activism. The novel showcases resistance as a way of recovering one's identity, especially when confronted with systemic oppression and racial prejudice. Starr Carter, the main character, represents the battle of existing in a society that strives to erase, distort, and silence Black identity. Along her journey, Thomas shows how activism catalyzes transformation by allowing individuals to reclaim their identities and dismantle oppressive systems.

Resistance in *The Hate U Give* is not simply a head-on clash; rather, it takes shape as a self-awakening, speaking out, and organized action. The internal battle Starr faces surrounding her friend Khalil's murder encapsulates the toxic conflict for anyone trying to survive versus fulfilling a sense of duty. When she

considers the brutal systemic injustice of Khalil's murder, it becomes clear to her that silence is indeed oppression. Starr's participation in the protests, as well as her decision to testify at the grand jury, show a marked change in her identity and self-construction. The author examines:

Cars speed away outside, and people run into the night in any direction where shots aren't firing off. Khalil leads me to a Chevy Impala parked under a dim streetlight. He pushes me in through the driver's side, and I climb into the passenger seat. We screech off, leaving chaos in the rear view mirror." (Thomas, 14)

In addition, the novel explains how the retrieval of social justice identity is a collaborative effort. The citizens of Garden Heights, which is mostly Black where Starr lives, come together as a community to protest the wrongful assassination of Khalil, showcasing the power of collective activism. Thomas stresses that identity is not created in solitude but instead forged in a community with a common past and a shared vision for the future. The neighborhood's reaction against police violence captures the ongoing struggle for racial justice in America and reminds us of real-life movements like Black Lives Matter. This shared fight supports the notion that activism is both individualistic and collective, fostering cultural identity and unity.

The activism within the novel around issues of race, identity, resistance, and self-identification shifts the debate on what constitutes activism and its impact on personal and collective relations. In this light, Thomas's activism depicts the consequences of oppressive structures when societal racism goes unchallenged, advocating for the repositioning and recognition of marginalized voices within society. Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* exemplifies a story infused with the consciousness of race in society, particularly concerning Black people in America. The novel revolves around Starr Carter, a 16-year-old African American girl who sees her childhood friend Khalil get shot by a police officer.

This very painful encounter is the moment that triggers Starr toward the realization of the many racial inequalities that exist not only in her life but also in the lives of the people around her. Thomas's depiction of Starr coming to terms with issues regarding her race and identity, as well as the socio-political environment, captures the impact personal experience and the evolving consciousness about race within society can have.

Starr's life is a blend of personal and her-worlds-from-worlds navigation, which captures racial consciousness. Garden Heights, an inner city Black area, is Starr's home, while a mostly white-privileged private school is her college. The socio-economic disparity within America's urban black experience and the white structures - which often tend to be overlooked - is the reality behind these two scenarios. The parallel existence in which Starr is expected to fit into one of the opposing ideologies' standards forces her to view life from two different perspectives and switch between these worlds. The internal turmoil she faces can be viewed as a summation of the entire Black race in this country, whose identity is in many ways crafted without their consent due to societal norms, institutional discrimination, and systematic violence, among other factors.

Starr's understanding of her racial identity evolves as the novel progresses. The traumatic experience of Khalil's death propels her political consciousness as she starts to grapple with the meaning of race in her life and the context of systemic violence inflicted on Black people. The realization that Khalil's murder is not an isolated occurrence but rather engrained in a larger system of racial profiling and police violence compounds the novel's central conflict: the intertwining of individual experience and social oppression. Thomas employs Starr's political awakening to explore the profound impact of personal experiences, especially those marked by trauma and injustice, on shaping a collective consciousness around race.

Additionally, with Starr, Thomas dives into the intricacies of race, solidarity, and activism. While Starr struggles with the psycho-social elements of the injustice surrounding Khalil's death, she has to deal with the harsh reality of speaking up—what it means, and how it impacts her personally when fighting against the power structures. Starr's initial silence stems from the fear of losing social standing and acceptance from her peers within the overwhelming whiteness of her schooling environment. Nevertheless, with the encouragement of her family, friends, and community, Starr eventually finds the courage to speak up. The novel underscores the journey of reclaiming one's silenced identity. It illustrates the impact of racial injustice on the lives of the marginalized—showing how people transform from passive observers to active participants of social change.

Starr's experience as a counterpoint to Black dehumanization, the novel also addresses the media's depiction of Black victims suffering police brutality. By showcasing a broad spectrum of Starr's character, Thomas portrays the effects of racial violence on people in front of the camera, using rays of empathy to reflect their humanity. Starr's decision to actively pursue social change alongside her self-discovery journey symbolizes the growing societal desire to respond to racial issues with proactive engagement and advocacy. *The Hate U Give* best captures an insight into racial awareness, revealing how profoundly race carves out one's identity, shaping both individual perceptions and societal frameworks. Through the character of Starr, Thomas articulates the sociopolitical aspects of Blackness in poignant discourse for the current generation grappling with enduring racial discrimination.

*The Hate U Give* captivates readers with its deep insight into the ways various forms of oppression and discrimination intersect and their impact on the personally and socially defined self. Starr's story illustrates the deep inner conflicts stemming from the racist structures that seek to silence her by fracturing

her into competing identities. It highlights the prominence of restoring one's silence and holding power in a world that constantly trivializes and neutralizes individuals. The complexities of her identity remind us that it is not merely constructed but also informed by the realities of discrimination based on one's race and class. It poses a challenge to the readers to consider discrimination and violence inflicted upon individuals because of their background and the acts of advocacy and activism needed to address these injustices through collective action. Not only does *The Hate U Give* articulate a moving coming-of-age story of a Black individual, but it also promotes critical discourse on systems of injustice that permeate society.

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