

Racism as a Tool of Disempowerment: A Study of Angie Thomas's *On the Come Up*

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Abstract

Aims: *This paper examines the theme of racism as a tool of disempowerment in Angie Thomas's *On the Come Up* (2019). Accompanied by systemic racism, the novel depicts the life of a young black girl, Bri, who aspires to be a successful rapper.*

Methodology and Approaches: *Racism, alongside other elements like classism, sexism, and even Bri's identity, heavily shaped Bri's life throughout the novel. The focus of the paper is to explain how Bri, with her talent and determination to fight her circumstances, faces societal racism that restrains her from having complete agency.*

Outcome: *From the standpoint of microaggressions, racial stereotypes, and the demand to be a representative of a race, the analysis tries to make sense of the different dimensions of their burdens alongside racism as a tool used to suppress marginalized groups of people systematically rather than through mere prejudice.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The study highlights how racism operates not only through overt prejudice but also through systemic practices that limit the agency and potential of marginalized individuals, emphasizing the need to recognize and challenge such oppressive structures.*

Keywords: Racism, Disempowerment, Identity, Microaggressions, Systemic Oppression, Empowerment

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Racism is one of the oldest issues that continue to affect the sociopolitical and economic life of any marginalized community. In Thomas's book *On the Come Up*, the main character, Bri Jackson, struggles with school, identity, race, and prejudice and strives to be accepted by her fellow students. This reveals her identity being plagued by society. Through Bri's journey, Thomas examines racism not only as a personal offense but also as a disempowering system that curtails the potential of young Black people.

The author emphasizes the discrimination racism has on self-image, identity, and aspirations, particularly how the character deals with hope in a post-Obama America. The paper intends to analyze narrative techniques, character building, and the socio-political background of the work to demonstrate how Thomas contributes to the debate on race and inequality. The study will try to

answer the question of what cycles of disempowerment are waiting in tangled webs of racism in the exposed layers of civic society in teenagers' lives, as witnessed in Bri's story. The study also contextualizes the fight for social value in relation to age, gender, and class.

When dealing with racism as a tool of disempowerment, Thomas examines the powerful weakness of living prejudice reinforced within one's culture and how it systematically creates inequalities in society. Scholars like Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) assert that racial bias serves as a means of social control, curtailing social mobility for lower strata. This is clear in the case of Thomas's depiction of Bri, a Black girl whose dreams are frustrated by cultural and systemic bias. Thomas's story reflects Kimberlé Crenshaw's (2013) principle of intersectionality, as Bri's Black womanhood coupled with her social class heightens her racial discrimination endured.

Moreover, critical reviews of Thomas's first novel, *The Hate U Give*, frequently comment on the impact of racism on the identity and agency of the characters. In this respect, *On the Come Up* expands on the theme by showing how Bri's struggle for recognition as an artist mirrors her struggle in society as a whole. Scholars Bell Hooks (2000) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) discuss the effects of racism on the Black psyche, illustrating Bri's journey as an embodiment of the oppressed fighting to regain control in a society determined to erase Blackness. Through these lenses, this research aims to highlight racism as a silencing tool, particularly when examining adolescents and their creative outlets, which Thomas's text reveals.

The story is centered on 16-year-old Brianna "Bri" Jackson, an upcoming rapper trapped in a systemic racist world that continually puts hurdles on her aspirations. *On the Come Up* does not view racism merely as a background phenomenon: it is at the center of Bri's disempowerment, which shapes her dreams, relationships, and reality. In this particular analysis, I focus on how

racism works as a device of disempowerment in the novel and deepens the gap between personal and professional agency for Bri.

What makes Bri's case stand out is the bitter truth of a young Black girl in a low-income area. Bri's family struggles to make ends meet and live in neighborhoods that are tainted by a stigmatized and racialized impoverished geography. While Bri's efforts to break free from this entrenched cycle through her music are a form of resistance, it is equally devastating as she faces relentless challenges because of her race. The Black middle-class narrative tends to overlook the fierce battle she endures to gain access to the male-dominated, rap-dominated space where she is not only a black woman but a black woman who faces being dismissed as vocally disabled.

Throughout the novel, there is a limited focus on institutional critique, which centers on the entertainment industry's exploitation of Black artists. Continually, a vast system that profits from the exploitation of Black talent while denying them any true creative freedom thwarts Bri's hopes of achieving her dreams of becoming a successful rapper. While Bri struggles with the need to fit into the industry's racialized expectations, she comes to the painful realization that her success, not her artistry, is based on how well she performs the Black stereotypes the industry feeds off. This form of systemic racism strips her of the ability to define her identity. It makes her contend with a reality where her race is an asset, not an empowering identity, which she can claim.

Further, Bri's relationships with her peers and family members show how multifaceted racism as a system of disempowerment is in Bri's life. The pull toward embracing gang violence or some aggressive form of identity is part of a wider socialization model that curtails options for Black adolescents. The combination of racism in Bri's school and neighborhood makes self-expression even more difficult because she is not only fighting for a space in a white world

but also fighting against the expectations of her people. Angie Thomas examines in *On the Come-Up*:

Everyone else cleared out of Midtown School of the Arts almost an hour ago, except for us juniors whose parents or guardians signed us up for ACT prep. It's not guaranteed to get you a thirty-six, but Jay said I better get close since she "paid these folks a light bill" for this class. Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, I drag myself into this classroom and hand my phone over to Mrs. Murray. (Thomas, 1)

All in all, *On the Come Up* gives a well-balanced account of the many ways in which racism in Bri's life is a complex system of disempowerment. In her case, it affects the development of her identity, goals, and connections. The book critiques systemic racism as it is practiced individually through racial profiling and commercially through the systemic exploitation of Black artists. Bri's path, which is full of defiance and struggle, highlights the relentless battle of young Black people trying to restore control and dominance over a society that aims to subsume them under their identity.

In *On the Come Up*, Angie Thomas strongly emphasizes the accounts of racism in America through the lens of identity, youth, and the socio-political challenges of a country grappling with its racist past. This fiction remarkably documents a narrative of Bri, a sixteen-year-old African American girl who dreams of making it big in the rap industry, and exposes how the tragic consequences of racial injustice persist in the United States. Racism, which is foundational to America's social order, severely hinders the achievement of black aspirations, creating an unending cycle of poverty, limited opportunities, and systemic social exclusion. Through Bri's experience, Thomas does not only examine the absence of discrimination but, more insidiously, the discrimination is woven into policies that continue to oppress Black citizens. Thomas examines in *On the Come-Up*:

Jay takes two plates out of a cabinet—one for me, one for her. Trey won't be home for a while. Jay's still in her "Church Jay" look that's required as the church secretary: the ponytail, the knee-length skirt, and the long-sleeved blouse that covers her tattoos and the scars from her habit. It's Thursday, so she's got classes tonight as she goes after that social work degree she wants to make sure other people get the help she didn't back when she was on drugs. For the past few months, she's been in school part-time, taking classes several nights a week. She usually only has time to either eat or change, not both. Guess she chose to eat tonight. (Thomas, 5)

The backdrop pertaining to the character's racism can be traced to the multifaceted impact of slavery, segregation, and disenfranchisement, which continues to have an enduring impact on Black communities. In the context of the novel, the firsthand aspects of racism are shown through the black woman, Bri, who is still struggling to make an impact on the industry. The way Black voices are silenced, especially from impoverished and neglected urban areas, calls attention to the rampant inequity that exists within cultural representations. Furthermore, the novel highlights how the music industry operates; it focuses primarily on 'bankable, popular' artists and ignores authentic Black music. This shows the consistent reality of exploitation and commodification of Black culture, where black artists are heavily controlled and exploited economically without the means to voice their issues or achieve true success on their terms. Thomas writes:

Jimmy's parking lot is almost filled up, but not everybody is trying to get in the building. The "let out" has already started. That's the party outside that happens every Thursday night after the final battle in the Ring. For almost a year now, folks have been using Jimmy's as a party spot, kinda like they do Magnolia Ave on Friday nights. See, last year a kid was murdered by a cop just a few streets away from my grandparents' house.

He was unarmed, but the grand jury decided not to charge the officer. There were riots and protests for weeks. Half the businesses in the Garden were either intentionally burned down by rioters or were casualties of the war. Club Envy, the usual Thursday nightspot, was a casualty. (Thomas, 15)

The idea of respectability politics heavily influences Bri's experience as well. In the novel, Bri struggles to embrace her identity as a young Black girl who, while unapologetic about her roots, is fiercely bound by the expectations of her community. Her journey demonstrates how people from marginalized communities must navigate an intersection of different, often contradictory, burdens shaped by the legacy of racist violence. The burden for Bri to achieve and still be regarded as "respectable" is often at odds with the racially determined realities of her surroundings, where, at times, survival demands adopting a façade of toughness, which is rooted in her struggles with the pressures of certain racial stereotypes.

Overall, *On the Come Up* illustrates that racism, in its form of disempowerment, constructs the lives of marginalized people. Bri's life exposes, through Angie Thomas' eyes, the legacy of racism not only in personal encounters but in entire systems bound to constrain inequality. Is this not a society where old injustices manifest anew, debilitating whole generations and entrenching them in poverty and disenfranchisement, especially black youth? Bri's narrative, while emblematic of the spirit of struggle within oppressed communities, calls for change and urges readers to act against the systems entrenched in racial injustice. Thomas observes:

The parking lot club's not really my thing (partying in the freezing cold? I think not), but it's cool to see people showing off their new rims or their hydraulics, cars bouncing up and down like they don't know a thing about gravity. The cops constantly drive by, but that's the new normal in the

Garden. It's supposed to be on some "Hi, I'm your friendly neighborhood cop who won't shoot you" type shit, but it comes off as some "We're keeping an eye on your black asses" type shit. (Thomas, 15)

Angie Thomas paints a rich picture of Brianna Jackson in *On the Come Up*, the portrait of a 16-year-old caught in the crossfire of race, class, and identity in a racialized society. Brianna's characterization sustains the novel's attempt to analyze the effect of racism as a tool of disempowerment not only on her relationships with other people but also on her mind, emotions, and ambitions. Completing Brianna's story is the paradox of self-empowerment and systemic oppression that undermines her because of her race.

Brianna, or Bri, is a budding rapper from Garden Heights, one of the predominantly Black areas suffering from high levels of poverty. Like any young artist, she dreams of making it big in the music business. However, as a young Black woman, she understands the enormous obstacles placed in the path of her professional growth by society. Bri's ambition to make it in the rap industry is motivated by the desire to redefine her identity and, equally important, take command of her story. Unfortunately, reclaiming one's story is difficult when one's identity is bound by racial stereotypes that traditionally dominate Black life.

However, Bri's journey for self-empowerment is hindered by the internalized racism she wrestles with, which is most prominent during her first interfaces with the rap industry. Bri attempts to use stereotypes about Black women in hip-hop to guide her early portrayals of self, adopting an alter ego that mirrors the sexually aggressive Black female artist caricature. Her fight against the need to conform to these expectations is reflective of the broader societal expectations that many Blacks, particularly Black women, face. Bri's story is one of growth as she learns that she is able to amplify her voice by casting aside the stereotypes imposed upon her.

The novel further highlights the influence of family alongside the community in helping Bri develop her identity. The bond she shares with her mother and brother, as well as the difficulties they endure together, shapes her understanding of resilience and strength. Moreover, Jackson's family's struggles to uphold themselves in the face of systemic oppression profoundly comment on the ability of the family to nurture self-empowerment. Bri's relationships with other members of her community, such as her mentor, also reflect the importance of collective action to overcome the helplessness inflicted by racism. Thomas observes:

But see, Popkenchurch is problematic, and not because of digestive drama that may ensue. Jay only gets it when something bad happens. When she broke the news that her aunt Norma had terminal cancer a couple of years ago, she bought Popkenchurch. When she realized she couldn't get me a new laptop last Christmas, Popkenchurch. When Grandma decided not to move out of state to help her sister recover from her stroke, Jay bought Popkenchurch. I've never seen anybody take their aggression out on a chicken thigh quite like she did that day. (Thomas, 10)

Lastly, the character of Brianna Jackson in *On the Come Up* illustrates how race deeply asymmetries disempowerment—particularly for young black women—in nuanced and multi-layered ways. Her journey is one of self-empowerment but also underscores the critique of the systems put in place to restrain her potential. Bri's experiences allow readers, alongside the author, to navigate the intricate dynamics of race, identity, power, and the struggle in a society that aims to silence oppressed communities.

In *On the Come Up*, the narrative of disempowerment for the protagonist, Brianna (Bri), is profoundly shaped by the intersections of racism, class, and gender. The novel sheds light on how the systems of race, class, and gender interact within society to constrain the lives of young Black women in America's

inner cities. Thomas reveals the ways that oppression intersects and compiles to enhance Bri's challenges to gain agency and acknowledgment.

Racism in *On the Come Up* is represented as an obstacle that hinders Bri's social and self-image advancement. Bri, a Black teen trying to enter the rap world, faces latent racial stereotypes that severely limit her prospects every day. Bri's race becomes a prominent focal point regarding the discrimination she often suffers and exclusionism from society, which occurs as a backdrop to her music and her judging looks and origin. This racism is both external and internal, as Bri struggles with her self-image as a young Black female in a world that seeks to negate her existence. This attempt becomes a journey to overcome racial stereotypes intertwined with the desire to forge a personal identity in a world that perpetually confines her.

Socioeconomic status fuels Bri's experience of disempowerment within society. As a working-class citizen residing in a socioeconomic oppressed neighborhood along with her family, Bri is conscious of the financial limits that cap her family's upward mobility potential. These financial strains often push Bri to make compromises regarding her self-image and identity. With regard to her aspirations of becoming a rapper, class is a matter of Bri's self-perception as she feels the need to uphold the portrayal of a successful artist born out of adversity. Her songs, which depict the harsh realities, including extreme poverty and violence, are often exploited by the privileged and power-brokers who commodify her work devoid of authentic representation. This is a stark indicator of how class as a tool of exploitation works in disempowerment. Bri is forced to live in a world where the shadow of her socioeconomic background overshadows her unique talents.

The concepts of femininity and gender norms routinely undermine Bri's ambition, thus intersecting with her experience of gender. Bri encounters pushback and skepticism as she tries to carve out a space for herself in the male-

dominated rap industry. On top of that, she has to deal with the additional challenge of proving herself in a space where women are often sidelined or disregarded. The rampant sexualization and objectification of women within the music industry also make it more difficult for her to be recognized on her terms. This illustrates Bri's tenacity, a hallmark of the experience of young Black women striving to meet the dual expectations of race and gender in a society that stifles their possibilities.

The protagonist Brianna "Bri" Jackson struggles to contend for self-identity while simultaneously battling racism, socioeconomic marginalization and systemic oppression. The novel tackles questions of identity and injustice through Bri's journey, which is set in a racially divided urban space caused by civil violence. Bri's experiences evoke the struggle of disempowerment, and as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that the path to structural resistance was in the will not to be disempowered.

Bri's disempowerment is socially constructed and bound to her race and socioeconomic status, which shapes her life in a dominantly white world. As a Black teenager, Bri faces the dual burden of being marginalized in an inner-city school and on the streets. The violence and poverty that surround her attempts to escape are exacerbated by systemic racism, which constructs hurdles of opportunity and resource-laden gatekeeping. Racism refers to the more subtle yet inescapable forms of discrimination that follow Bri daily—from the constricted economic opportunities her family wrestles with, to the prejudiced assumptions people make about her looks, to her love for hip-hop, an unrelenting struggle against insidious disempowerment punctuates Bri's life.

Bri grapples with whether to change her rap to fit the music industry's mold, facing one of the most challenging moments of her resistance. Her decision not to conform to the industry's expectations—instead choosing to create music that reflects her authentic self rather than stereotypical representations of

Blackness—exemplifies her deepening empowerment. This change in Bri's mindset demonstrates the power of self-definition, in this case, coming from the realization that true achievement is not external applause but rather remaining anchored to her roots and community.

Thomas's story teaches us that the struggle against disempowerment is not an individual battle but rather a collective one. Bri's self-celebration is influenced by the emotional and moral support of her voices—her family, friends, and community. Through this lens, *On the Come Up* portrays resistance as a communal act of empowerment where the tools for dismantling systems of racial oppression are found in solidarity and self-expression. Through her character, Bri, Angie Thomas criticizes racism as a means of disempowerment while also offering a vision of hope that emanates from self-empowerment, authenticity, and collective action.

In conclusion, *On the Come Up* offers an insightful account of the impact of racism on the oppression of Black youth. Using Bri as her focal point, the novel epitomizes how racism acts as a weapon of disempowerment, providing limited avenues of advancement and reinforcing systematic inequities. Bri's journey emphasizes the struggle of self-cognition in an anti-Black society—the society that strives to silence Black people—and where achieving success means conforming to expectations that are antagonistic to her race and class. The novel does not shy away from portraying the enduring attempt of Bri's strength towards the attempt to triumph over these barriers as an illustration of the fight black people go through to survive on the surface of racism.

Through showcasing these attempts as a form of defiance against racial discrimination, Thomas has presented an indirect social critique of the structures that underlie and perpetuate racial segregation with an appeal to self-assertion and self-empowerment as a form of protest. *On the Come Up* bears witness to the profound impact of art, identity, and community on the life of an individual as

well as during the fight for equality and justice through demonstrating hope in the bleak reality of their deprived lives. In Bri's story, Thomas moves to take the space and time of those silenced and forced to live without a voice while challenging the systems in society that continue to silence black people and black society.

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