

Fighting Oppression: Racism in Angie Thomas' *On the Come Up*

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Abstract

*This study aims to describe racism and the struggle of the characters to face racism in the novel *On the Come Up* (2019) by Angie Thomas. The writer used critical race theory from Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001) to analyze the issue. The method used in this study was qualitative method presented in the form of essay. Based on the analysis there are some tenets that describe racism in the novel. The result of this study showed that there are five tenets of critical race theory namely, everyday racism as described by black people who always get discriminated against, interest convergence as described by white people who take advantage of black people for material gain, social construction as described through the bad prejudices that black people get, intersectionality as described through the characters who get many forms of oppression at once because of their identities, and voice of color as described through black people's voices relate to the experience of racism. Moreover, this study showed various struggles and actions of the characters in facing the tenets of racism in critical race theory such as opposed the discrimination, against white people who took advantage of them, against the bad prejudice they get, and struggling for a place free from racism and other forms of oppression..*

Keywords: *racism, critical race theory, struggle, oppression*

A. Introduction

Racism is still a big problem today, especially the racism where white people treat black people unfairly. This problem is talked about a lot all over the world because there are many cases of racism happening, especially in countries like America. One report from the Human Rights Watch website talks about how racism and xenophobia are still strong influences in American society. White people often think they are better than others just because of their race, and this leads to discrimination and unfair treatment against people who are not white.

There have been many cases of racism where white people do bad things to black people. They discriminate against them, insult them, and sometimes take away their rights. For example, in Philadelphia, two black men were not allowed to use a coffee shop's restroom, and the police were called on them for no good reason. This happened just because they were waiting for a friend and hadn't ordered anything yet. People protested against this unfair treatment. Racism isn't just about discrimination; it can also lead to violence. There have been cases where black people have been hurt or even killed because of racism. One well-known case is the death of George Floyd, who was killed by the police in Minneapolis. He was accused of something minor, but

the police treated him very badly, and he died because of it. Many other black people have suffered similar fates because of racism.

The writer of this piece is focusing on racism because it's a big problem that needs attention. There are so many cases of black people being treated unfairly just because of their race. These cases are really worrying, so the writer wants to raise awareness about racism and equality. Racism is talked about a lot these days, with many news stories and articles showing what's happening. The writer hopes that by talking about racism, more people will care about making things fair for everyone in the future. Racism is a common theme in literature, especially in novels. Novels can tell interesting stories while also showing what life is like for different people. One novel that talks about racism is "On the Come Up" by Angie Thomas.

"On the Come Up" is an American novel by Angie Thomas. It's won awards and is well-regarded by critics. The novel tells the story of a black girl's life in America and deals with issues like racism and unfair treatment. The writer of this piece wants to analyze the novel to show how racism affects people in real life. There have been many studies about racism, but this one is different. Instead of just talking about racism in the novel, it also looks at how black people fight against racism. The writer is using a theory called critical race theory to help understand racism better. This theory says that racism is about power and that it's important to fight against it. The review of literature also talks about how race is a social construct and how racism affects people's everyday lives. It explains different aspects of critical race theory and how they help us understand racism better. The writer wants to use this theory to show how racism works and how it affects people's lives.

B. Method

This study required a research method for analysis. The writer employed a qualitative method to analyze data from Angie Thomas' novel "On the Come Up" (2019) in the form of an essay. Qualitative methods are chosen because they emphasize in-depth observation, making them the most suitable for this study. The purpose of the qualitative method is to reveal and understand a phenomenon in a specific context (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, p. 142). This method is used to describe data that are not numerical but represent social phenomena. Data for this study were extracted from "On the Come Up" by Angie Thomas. The data included narratives and quotations from the novel, which spans 447 pages. To obtain appropriate data, the writer followed several steps. Firstly, the entire novel was read multiple times to grasp its contents. Then, data related to the issue of racism were identified and collected by underlining important sentences in the novel.

In analyzing the data from "On the Come Up" (2019), several steps were taken. Firstly, the collected data were categorized based on the perspectives used in critical race theory by Delgado and Stefancic (2001). After categorization, the data were analyzed

according to the theory. Additionally, in explaining the narrative elements in the novel, this study adopted the perspective of Mays (2019). All data were elucidated in the essay format, as this study employed a descriptive qualitative approach.

C. Findings and Discussion

The writer analyzed the portrayal of racism in the novel "On the Come Up" based on critical race theory by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. Additionally, the struggles of the characters in facing racism were described. The racism depicted in the novel primarily involves white people discriminating against black people. The main character, Brianna Jackson, a sixteen-year-old African American girl, aspires to become a renowned rapper like her deceased father. Alongside narrating her journey to achieve her dream, the novel delves into her daily life and encounters with racism.

1. Racism Experienced by the Main Character in "On the Come Up" Novel

The writer analyzed racism in the novel based on critical race theory by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001), which includes tenets such as everyday racism, interest convergence, social construction, intersectionality, and voice of color.

1.1 Everyday Racism Experienced by the Main Character

Racism is often normalized by oppressors who may not even realize their discriminatory actions. An example from the novel illustrates this issue: "every single time I get sent to her, she asks me questions that sound like they came from some 'How to Talk to Statistical Black Children Who Come to Your Office Often' handbook" (Thomas, 2019, p.7). Brianna frequently visits the school counselor's office, where she faces biased treatment based on her race. The counselor's differential treatment of white and black children perpetuates discrimination, highlighting the normalization of racism.

1.2 Interest Convergence Experienced by the Main Character

Privileges, such as access to better neighborhoods, are often reserved for white people, illustrating interest convergence. For instance, "you've got rich kids from the north side, middle-class kids from downtown and Midtown, and hood kids like me" (Thomas, 2019, p. 49). Economic disparities dictate living conditions, with wealthy individuals residing in elite areas while Brianna's neighborhood, referred to as the "hood," remains impoverished. This disparity reflects how racism is exploited to maintain socioeconomic hierarchies, benefiting white individuals at the expense of black communities.

1.3 Social Construction Experienced by the Main Character

White individuals often stereotype black people, portraying them as inferior or criminal. For example, "have you witnessed any traumatic events lately, such as shootings? (Just because I live in the 'ghetto' doesn't mean I dodge bullets every day)" (Thomas, 2019, p. 8). The term "ghetto" carries negative connotations, associating it

with crime and violence. This societal perception constructs black individuals as inherently dangerous or criminal, perpetuating racial stereotypes.

1.4 Intersectionality Experienced by the Main Character

Intersectionality acknowledges the compounded forms of oppression individuals face due to intersecting identities. In the novel, Sonny, a gay African American man, grapples with discrimination based on his race and sexual orientation: "Yeah, but I can't risk it, Bri. Luckily, Rapid understands. We're taking our time or whatever. I guess I haven't told you and Malik about him because it's been nice to not have to explain shit and just... exist, you know?" (Thomas, 2019, p. 138). Sonny's intersectional identity exposes him to multiple forms of discrimination, complicating his navigation of societal norms and expectations.

1.5 Voice of Color of the Main Character in Experiencing Racism

Black individuals often express their experiences of racism through creative mediums, such as poetry or music. Brianna utilizes rap lyrics to articulate her encounters with racism: "No matter where I'm at, keep an eye for police. If they thinkin' I'm suspicious, they ain't trying to listen" (Thomas, 2019, p. 81). Through her music, Brianna raises awareness about police brutality and racial profiling, amplifying the voice of marginalized communities.

2. The Struggle of the Main Character against Racism in "On the Come Up" Novel

In the face of racism, oppressed individuals exhibit resilience and resistance. The main character, Brianna, and supporting characters demonstrate various forms of resistance against racism, aligning with critical race theory tenets.

2.1 The Struggle of the Main Character against Everyday Racism

Brianna's guardian, Jay, advises her to resist succumbing to racism: "You're gonna face a whole lot of Longs and Tates in your life, baby. More than I'd like. But you never let their actions determine what you do. The moment you do, you've given them the power. You hear me?" (Thomas, 2019, p. 70). Jay encourages Brianna to maintain agency despite encountering racism, emphasizing the importance of resilience in the face of adversity.

2.2 The Struggle of the Main Character against Interest Convergence

Brianna and her friends organize a coalition to address racism within their school: "We've formed an unofficial black and Latinx student coalition... We plan to demand changes from the administration. Fact they need us at that school" (Thomas, 2019, pp. 151-152). Their collective action aims to challenge institutionalized racism and hold the administration accountable for discriminatory practices, illustrating resistance against interest convergence.

2.3 The Struggle of the Main Character against Social Construction

Brianna's grandmother challenges racial stereotypes to combat societal misconceptions: "It's like how when I go with my grandma to one of the nice grocery stores out in the suburbs and she tells me to 'talk like you got some sense.' She doesn't want people to think we're 'some of those hood rats who frequent their establishments'" (Thomas, 2019, p. 212). By defying racial stereotypes, Brianna's grandmother asserts the dignity and humanity of black individuals, resisting the social construction of racism.

2.4 The Struggle of the Main Character against Intersectionality

Sonny endeavors to transcend the intersecting oppressions of racism and homophobia: "My ACT and SAT scores will get me into a good art school, help me get scholarships...I know, nothing is guaranteed, but damn, for at least four years, maybe I can live somewhere other than that neighborhood with all its bullshit" (Thomas, 2019, p. 138). Sonny's pursuit of education and upward mobility reflects his resistance against intersectional forms of oppression, striving for a better future free from systemic discrimination.

Through their actions and resilience, the characters in "On the Come Up" confront and challenge the pervasive nature of racism, embodying the principles of critical race theory in their struggle for justice and equality.

D. Conclusion

Through the analysis of data from Angie Thomas' novel "On the Come Up" (2019), it becomes evident that racism towards people of color is pervasive within the narrative. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's critical race theory (2001) provides a framework for understanding the various manifestations of racism in the novel.

Firstly, the tenet of everyday racism is exemplified through Bri and her black friends at school, who face discrimination on a daily basis, and Bri's experiences of racism are often disregarded by white students. Secondly, the concept of interest convergence is illustrated by the contrasting living environments of Bri and other black characters compared to those of white characters, highlighting the privilege white individuals have in accessing better neighborhoods. Additionally, Bri is exploited by white individuals for their own material gain.

Thirdly, the notion of social construction is depicted through the negative stereotypes and prejudices directed at Bri as a black individual. She is frequently labeled as a criminal, hoodlum, aggressive, and threatening by white people, perpetuating the idea of white superiority and black inferiority. Fourthly, the concept of intersectionality is explored through Bri and Sonny, who face multiple forms of oppression due to their intersecting identities.

Lastly, the tenet of the voice of color is exemplified through Bri's advocacy for herself and her community, as well as through her creative expression in the form of song lyrics, which articulate her experiences of racism.

Moreover, the findings from the data analysis reveal the various forms of resistance and activism undertaken by black characters in the novel to combat the racism they encounter. Firstly, there is the struggle against everyday racism, demonstrated through Jay's defiance against the discrimination her daughter faces at school. Secondly, there is the resistance to interest convergence, as portrayed by Bri and her friends who challenge the exploitation of black individuals by white counterparts for financial gain.

Thirdly, there is the effort to combat social construction, evidenced by Bri and her allies confronting the negative stereotypes propagated by white individuals. Lastly, there is the fight against intersectionality, embodied by Sonny's quest for a better life free from oppression..

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