

## Exploring Racial Discrimination Against Black Teens in 'Light It Up' by Kekla Magoon

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### Abstract

*This study aims to analyze the racial discrimination issue that portrayed in the Light It Up novel by Kekla Magoon. The writer analyzed the racial discrimination in the novel by using the theory of Delgado & Stefancic. Besides, this study uses a qualitative approach, which is revealing the main issue by describing it in the form of sentences and paragraphs. The data collection was obtained by classifying some points that related to racial discrimination and the responses of black teenagers. The result of this study shows that there are three aspects of racial discrimination, they are normal racism, interest convergent (material determinism), and social construction. From all the data that have been analyzed, social construction is the dominant data in this study. Moreover, this study shows the white brutality and prejudice behavior toward African American teenagers. In conclusion, this study portrays that racial discrimination has negative impacts on the lives of black teenagers.*

**Keywords:** *Black Teenager, Prejudice, Racial Discrimination, Response to Racial Discrimination*

### A. Introduction

In a multicultural society, there is always a tendency to issue with diversity of race, color, ethnicity, and origin nationality itself. The more diverse its country, the more racism arises. Racial Discrimination occurs due to the belief that one racial group is innately superior to another (Macionis, 2011, p. 326). In other words, majority people are expected to be superior, while the minorities are still inferior. In conclusion, the dominant races make inferiors to be the lower group.

Racial discrimination is mistreatment based on personal characteristics such as race, skin color, and appearance. According to Menggalomo, Oroh & Mamentu (2020, p. 13), differences in appearance, race, belief and intelligence can cause racial

discrimination in society. The practice of racial discrimination brings inequality for Black people to get rights and justice. The prejudice of black people as inferior cannot separate from slavery history and segregation. According to Lauer & Lauer (2014, p. 231), "The first African Americans to arrive, in 1619, were indentured servants, not slaves. However, states soon passed laws that legitimated slavery, and those brought here as slaves were legally defined as property, not as a person." From the beginning of their appearance, the nation and people already reside prejudice in their minds and mistreated black people. That also makes their slavery history justified by various evidence of inferiority inherent in black people.

Recently, racial discrimination also occurred towards a black man and a black girl who white police officers killed. New York Times released news (2020) about a black man named George Floyd, killed by Derek Chauvin, white police, for allegedly issuing counterfeit banknotes for cigarettes to a store employee. The white police hold George by stomping on his neck for almost ten minutes. This discrimination makes George die after one hour. Another case from the shooting of a black teen named Ma'Khia Bryant. As reported by USA Today (2021), She was shot by white police when Ma'Khia was fighting with a woman. Through the camera footage of Columbus police, Bryant was caught Bryant was pointing out a knife towards a woman. The shooting of a black girl teen shows how police derail black teenagers' lives. From the cases above, it is proved that black people are oftentargeted for discriminatory acts. Furthermore, those cases create awareness and protest in America, demanding justice and equal protection for citizens and victims.

Racial discrimination occurs not only in actual events but also in the literature. Authors often share opinions and experience in literary works. This is also considered a form of critical thinking from the author on social issues. Literature itself is a written work about human and social phenomena. One of the literary works is a Novel. The novel is a medium to convey the idea of the authors. Even though the novel is a fiction, but there are many things that readers could learn, such as the implied messages, and issues that are conveyed.

In this study, the writer chooses a novel entitled *Light It Up* by Kekla Magoon to focus on the portrayal of racial discrimination towards black teens. Kekla is an American writer of young adult fiction. Her *Light It Up* novel is one of Amazon's top ten best-selling books. Kekla also achieved the Margaret Edwards Award (2021) from the American Library Association (ALA) for her works – *The Rock and The River*, *How It Went Down*, *The Season of Styx Malone*, and *X*. *Light It Up* is her contribution to being young and black in America. Magoon aims to create awareness about equality for black people, especially teenagers. The novel is about the shooting by a white police officer against Shae Tatum, a thirteen-year-old black girl. Shae Tatum is killed just because of being Black. This event also affects other black teens.

In addition, Racial discrimination is always a hot topic in public, especially in America, because it is related to human rights and equality. The *Light It Up* novel portrays racial discrimination and injustice towards black people, especially black teen characters. Black teenagers can witness or experience racism up to five times

daily (English et al., 2020). It is also the oppressor (white-adult man) having never been prosecuted. In other words, Black teenagers become the main targets of racial discrimination because they are considered weak, powerless and reckless. Thus, it is easy for them to be underestimated by the dominant race. For this reason, the *Light It Up* novel is interesting to analyze in this study. People must know that black teenagers are the same as white-adult people who must be respected, protected and get equal treatment.

## **B. Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze racial discrimination in the novel "Light It Up." Qualitative research focuses on understanding the meaning individuals or groups attribute to social or human problems. It involves emergent questioning, data collection typically in the participants' setting, inductive data analysis progressing from specifics to general themes, and researcher interpretation of the data's significance (Creswell, 2014).

The qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of social issues through data collection in the form of sentences and paragraphs. In this study, the qualitative methodology facilitates a comprehensive exploration of racial discrimination as depicted in the novel, ultimately contributing to achieving the study's objectives.

Data collection involved several steps:

- Thoroughly reading the 368 pages of "Light It Up" by Kekla Magoon multiple times.
- Comprehensively understanding the narrative and identifying significant points related to racial discrimination.
- Classifying potential data into dialogue and narrative text.
- Noting and highlighting data pertaining to racial discrimination and the responses of black teen characters.

Data analysis followed these steps:

The collected data from the novel were analyzed using a qualitative approach, focusing on instances of racial discrimination.

- The data analysis was juxtaposed with theories from Delgado & Stefancic (2001) and David Mellor (2004) to analyze the responses of black teen characters.
- Conclusions drawn from the analysis were incorporated into the final chapter of the study.

By employing this methodological approach, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of racial discrimination in the context of the novel, shedding light on the experiences and responses of black teen characters.

## **C. Findings and Discussion**

### **The characters' response towards Racial Discrimination**

This part will explain the response of black teen characters to racial discrimination, which has many impacts on black people, especially black teenagers. They cannot voice and demand justice because of the power of the white race around them. However, they prove it with some responses. The response shows the perseverance of black teens in the face of racial discrimination. David Mellor's theory (2004) was used, including Defensive Response, Controlled Response, and Confrontational Response, to analyze the responses.

### **Defensive Response**

An African American individual exhibits a defensive response to circumvent potential encounters with racism. Aware of the repercussions of reacting strongly against discrimination, African Americans often exercise caution to avoid exacerbating racial tensions. In a scene from "Light It Up" by Kekla Magoon (2019), Tina expresses reluctance to venture outside due to the presence of law enforcement officers, stating, "I won't go outside...I don't want them to get me" (p. 132). This excerpt illustrates a defensive reaction as the character seeks to evade racism. Tina's conscious decision to avoid public spaces where encounters with discriminatory policing are likely reflects a strategy to protect herself from unjust treatment based on her race.

Similarly, another instance of defensive response is evident in a conversation between Devante and Robb within the confines of Devante's room. Robb criticizes Devante's roommate, Tyrell, lamenting that he "never wants to do anything interesting" and is overly focused on academics (Magoon, 2019, p. 39). Devante, recognizing the potentially racist undertones in Robb's complaints, chooses to disengage from the conversation. He avoids further interaction with Robb to prevent exacerbating racial tensions and to shield himself from discriminatory remarks about Tyrell. Devante's defensive reaction underscores his awareness of the need to protect himself and his roommate from further discrimination.

These examples highlight the defensive responses adopted by African American individuals to navigate environments where racism is prevalent. Their actions reflect a conscious effort to mitigate the risk of experiencing further discrimination and to safeguard their well-being in situations where racial tensions may escalate.

### **Controlled Response**

Inferiority and racial discrimination are inherently intertwined, often resulting in disparities in treatment, both material and non-material. Consequently, African Americans continuously navigate strategies for coping with such racism, sometimes opting not to directly address discriminatory acts. Despite facing discrimination, the oppressed often manage to maintain composure in the face of discriminatory behaviors.

In a scene from "Light It Up" by Kekla Magoon (2019), Tyrell, a black student, grapples with discriminatory remarks from his peer, Robb, who unwittingly provokes him. Tyrell, however, exhibits a controlled response, as evidenced by his internal dialogue: "Robb gets under my skin without even trying...I really need to focus. I don't have time for this" (p. 41). Tyrell's measured reaction highlights his deliberate attempt to regulate his emotions and refrain from escalating the situation further.

This quotation underscores Tyrell's strategic response to discrimination, particularly when it emanates from peers like Robb. By choosing not to confront Robb directly, Tyrell demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the need to manage his emotions and prioritize his academic pursuits. Rather than allowing discrimination to consume him, Tyrell exercises restraint and remains focused on his objectives.

Through Tyrell's example, the quotation reflects the resilience and resourcefulness of African Americans in navigating discriminatory environments. Despite facing adversity, individuals like Tyrell adeptly negotiate their responses to discrimination, exhibiting a strength of character in their ability to maintain composure and persevere in the face of injustice.

### **Confrontational Response**

African American teenagers frequently encounter racial discrimination in their daily lives, often facing oppression due to their perceived vulnerability and subordinate status in society. However, many black teens respond assertively to such discrimination, demonstrating a desire to confront and challenge their oppressors. In "Light It Up" by Kekla Magoon (2019), Zeke and his friends exemplify a confrontational response by actively engaging in community empowerment and awareness-building efforts. Zeke's statement, "Everything we do in the neighborhood to empower people, to create awareness, is frightening them," underscores their commitment to educating and advocating for the rights of African Americans (p. 14). By challenging oppressive structures and striving to change the behavior of white individuals, these teens assert their agency in combating racial discrimination.

Similarly, Kimberly's assertion, "This is radical segregationist stay-in-your-inferior-place bullshit and we can't stand for it," highlights her refusal to accept discriminatory treatment (p. 117). Her confrontational response exposes the inherent racism perpetuated by the dominant white race and underscores her determination to resist such oppression. Will further confronts racial injustice by condemning the unjust shooting of black teenagers, stating, "The cops are gunning for our annihilation, one innocent at a time" (p. 128). His vocal opposition to systemic racism challenges the narrative perpetuated by the dominant race and asserts the value of black lives. Devante articulates the pervasive bias underlying discriminatory actions, emphasizing that "the issue isn't mistakes, it's bias" (p. 158). His confrontational stance highlights the need to address underlying prejudices within law enforcement and society at large.

Lastly, the poignant reflection on injustice, "The truth, that my best friend was shot for no reason, by a man who will never be prosecuted," serves as a powerful indictment of systemic racism and its devastating consequences (p. 42). This confrontational response underscores the resilience of African American individuals in asserting their truths and demanding accountability for racial injustice.

In summary, these examples illustrate how African American teenagers respond confrontationally to racial discrimination, challenging oppressive systems and advocating for justice and equality. Despite facing systemic barriers, their assertive actions reflect a commitment to confronting racism and asserting their rights in society..

#### **D. Conclusion**

Based on the comprehensive analysis, it is evident that Kekla Magoon's novel, "Light It Up," vividly portrays the pervasive presence of racial discrimination. Racism constitutes an enduring facet of the lived experiences of black individuals, particularly African American teenagers, who often find themselves powerless in the face of discriminatory practices. Despite their vulnerability, these teens exhibit various responses to combat racial discrimination within their societal contexts. Through the critical lens of Delgado & Stefancic (2001), the novel elucidates multiple forms of racial discrimination, both overt and covert, including manifestations of everyday racism, interest convergence, and social construction. These discriminatory forces serve to inhibit the expression and agency of black teenagers within society, hindering their ability to assert themselves and participate fully in social life. Moreover, the impact of racial discrimination on the mental health and self-confidence of black teens further underscores the deleterious effects of systemic racism on their well-being and opportunities for advancement. The analysis also reveals distinct response patterns among black teenagers towards racial discrimination, as delineated by the theoretical framework proposed by David Mellor (2004). The first response observed is defensive, wherein victims strive to shield themselves from potential racist encounters, thereby safeguarding their well-being. The second response, characterized as controlled, involves a deliberate restraint from actively confronting discrimination, yet maintaining resilience in the face of adversity. Lastly, the confrontational response emerges as a proactive form of resistance, as individuals seek to challenge and confront the oppressors, thereby asserting their rights and dignity in the face of injustice. In summary, "Light It Up" provides a nuanced exploration of racial discrimination and its multifaceted impacts on the lives of African American teenagers. By elucidating various response strategies and the pervasive nature of racism, the novel offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of race relations and the enduring struggles faced by marginalized communities in contemporary society.

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