

THE PORTRAIT OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST BLACK AMERICAN PEOPLE IN ANGIE THOMAS' *THE HATE U GIVE*

POTRET DISKRIMINASI RASIAL TERHADAP ORANG KULIT HITAM AMERIKA DALAM *THE HATE U GIVE* KARYA ANGIE THOMAS

Yuliana Indri Yanti¹, Ferdinal²

^{1,2}Faculty of Humanities, Andalas University, Limau Manis, Kec.Pauh, Kota Padang, Sumatera Barat.

¹Email: yulianaiy.student.sasingunand@gmail.com

²Email: ferdinal09@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.25077/majis.2021.v3i1.52>

Abstract

*This research looks at racial discrimination against black American people represented in *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas. It aims to analyze how the book reflects racial discrimination in America. This research reveals the impact of racial discrimination, which put black American society in a harmful way, including getting a good education, accessing good work, and getting legal protection. The writing also highlights police brutality that oppresses black American people. It happens because racial bias is rooted in the American police department. The study applies the sociology of literature proposed by Alan Swingewood and Diana Laurensen, which discusses that literary work represented the social condition when it was produced. It also uses a systemic racism theory by Joe R. Feagin to reveal structural racism that oppresses black American people. The analysis shows that black American people find it hard to get equal rights and similar opportunities with other Americans. To get it, Black American people struggle to receive their rights.*

Keywords: racial discrimination, black American People, sociology of literature, systemic racism, struggle

INTRODUCTION

American history has recorded racial discrimination in many aspects of American life. American literature also portrays the issue in some works of literature. Racial discrimination becomes an essential theme in some pieces, right from the beginning of this nation. The term racial discrimination means mistreating someone based on their race. Racial discriminatory behavior can arise from conscious or unconscious attitudes that place a person lower based on their race. Blank, Dabady, and Citro (2004), in *Measuring Racial Discrimination*, state that racial discrimination happens when a person is treated less favorably than others,

or not given the same opportunities because of their race.

Racial discrimination against black people was ingrained in American society. Tracing back to American history, black people have been victims of discrimination by white people. Feagin & Vera (1995), in the book *White Racism: The Basic*, said that the white Americans have considered the black Americans as racially different for a long time based on specific physical characteristics, such as skin color and hair type, presumed to be unchangeable (p.114). This statement emphasizes that racial discrimination is maintained continuously in America. It means that racial discrimination had happened a long time

ago, mainly because of segregation called Jim Crow Law. Jim Crow separated blacks from whites. The white people got more easiness in their life. However, the Civil Rights Movement had encouraged people to eliminate forms of racial discrimination in 1960 legally. However, in practice, racial discrimination against black American people still exists. Justice and difficulty, which always cover black American people, happen until today.

Police killings of black Americans have occurred countless times in the United States. On May 28, 2020, *The New York Times* informed George Floyd, a black American civilian. A white American policeman killed him. In the article *The New York Times*, Hill et al. (2020) explained that Floyd was killed by white policemen. The policeman did not care when he moaned in pain and admitted that he was having trouble breathing. A white policeman pressed his neck with his knee. This phenomenon is indeed a problem for Americans who live today. This condition led to the black people's movement to reject this action called the *Black Lives Matter* movement.

A contemporary activist who talks about the racial discrimination issue in America is Shaun King. He is an American activist and writer who lives in Brooklyn. King focuses on civil rights, human rights, and racial justice. Besides, he also stood on the *Black Lives Matter* movement. This movement spoke explicitly about human dignity for African-Americans. King has also written several articles on social inequality, police brutality, and racial relations in America since 2014. As a human rights activist, King tries to expose systematic oppression and to fight injustice. He also helps people see how racism is not dead and forgotten until now.

In literature, Toni Morrison is also an important figure who talks about racism and discrimination. She is an African-American woman writer. All her works

speak a lot about race, class, and discrimination. Her most famous work is *The Bluest Eye* (1970). This novel talks about racial discrimination in the twentieth century in America, which discusses the conflict of black American family is due to social discrimination. Through *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison describes feelings that might arise from experiencing racism, such as anger, hatred, and so on. She uses this novel as a protest against the negative stereotypes. First, she fought for black women's rights and legal protection, and second, rose the role of the black American family. In addition, she also opposed the doctrine of education literacy, which claimed that white people had a better education than black people. Many responded to the novel because it traced the racism that still exists in America. It means racism and discrimination are serious problems that other writers always discuss in literary work.

This research employs *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas to discuss racial discrimination issues. This novel tells about separate life between black people and white people in America. Black people's life is depicted with insufficient facilities in Garden Heights. Meanwhile, white people's life is described with good facilities in Williamson. This investigation highlights social fractures. This novel also shows the tragic story of Khalil's death, a black teenager. White police killed Khalil who has no gun, and no criminal records. This tragic story describes how black people represent a racial minority in America.

Angie Thomas is an African-American woman writer. Thomas was born in Jackson, Mississippi, America. As the author of *The Hate U Give*, Thomas is a black American who also struggles against racism in America. She uses literary work as a tool to depict the social condition of black American people in America. She describes how difficult it was for black American people to get justice. An article

in *The Guardian* (2017) stated, “Thomas growing up poor in the predominantly black Georgetown neighborhood of Jackson, Mississippi.” Her own experiences influence *the Hate U Give*. She grew up witnessing drug dealing and gun crime in her environment.

This study is significant because of some reasons. First, the theme of this novel is related to the current phenomena. The race difference should show more tolerance. However, in practice, it is still not realized in America. White people always adhere to extreme racist values, so that many black people are disadvantaged. This novel also shows that racial discrimination touches black American people and is still difficult for equal rights and equal opportunities. She depicts racial discrimination harms black American people in education and working aspects and lack of legal protection. The racial discrimination issue has become an essential topic because some black American people are discriminated against, especially police brutality.

Second, the author of this novel depicts racial discrimination against black American people. She shows that black American people struggle to get a good education like white people do. Also, in fighting racial discrimination, black American people struggle to create good jobs to survive in their environment. This novel also highlights the struggles of black American people against police brutality and the American legal system. Considered a racial minority, black American people are less protected under the law. It is interesting because there is a struggle called a justice movement. A justice movement is a form of protest by black American people against the legal system that does not provide justice.

THEORIES AND METHODS

This research deals with discrimination. It applies sociology of literature by Alan Swingewood and Diana Laurenson. According to the book entitled *The Sociology of Literature*, Laurenson (1972) explained that sociology is essentially the scientific, the course of a social institution, and the social process. Sociology and literature reflects the human relationship and their environment. The sociology of literature approach talks about the relationship between literature and society. Literature can be viewed from a social phenomenon. It means that the sociology of the literature negotiations about phenomena that present a picture of life mostly consists of social realities.

Swingewood (1972) states three perspectives in the sociology of literature. The first is “Literature is a direct reflection of various facts of social structure, family relationships, class conflict, and possibly divorce trends and population composition” (p.13). It means that literature is considered a portrayal of social conditions, which indeed happens in real life.

The second is “Move away from the emphasis on the work of literature itself to the production side and especially to the writer’s social situation” (p.17). It means that the cost of production became the center of discussion on this perspective. There is a correlation between historical background and the development of literature constitute.

The third is to “attempt to trace how a particular society receives a work literature at a specific historical moment” (p.21). It means that literature implies deep insights into human and the social condition on a specific historical moment.

From this point of view, the sociology of literature explores how literary work has values for society. Literary work can be seen as a mirror of reality. It means

many of the authors could add any of their imagination to the factual story that depicts the real condition.

Besides, this study also uses systemic racism theory by Joe R. Feagin. In systemic racism theory, Feagin (2006) examines that systemic racism refers to how white superiority ideas capture everyday thinking at the system level. The view of systemic discrimination by Feagin is rooted in historical documentation, which confirms that racism is the foundation in American society and now exists in every aspect of society.

In the book *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (2006), Feagin developed a theory based on anti-black racism history and reality. The cruel treatment of white people, mostly police officers against black people, is still rampant.

From Feagin's theory, we explore how systemic racism oppresses black American people in every aspect of life and how they resist racism in *The Hate U Give* novel. In conducting this research, we use a qualitative and descriptive research method. The data are analyzed descriptively. The data were collected through library research, through which we collect all information regarding the research topic to be discussed.

The collected data come from two sources; primary data and secondary sources. The primary data derive from *The Hate U Give* novel by Angie Thomas, which contains twenty-six chapters. The secondary data derive from books, articles, and theses related to this research. We also collected the secondary data from online sources. The data are analyzed through words in the novel.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas portrays how racial discrimination has unfair treatment against black American

people in Garden Heights. Black American people receive unfair treatment in every aspect of life, such as education, employment, and legal protection. She also depicts police brutality as oppressing black American people. Indirectly, she points out how the lack of legal protection handling police brutality. In this novel, she highlights equal rights and equal opportunities for black American people. Therefore, black American people struggle against racial discrimination. The discussion is divided into racial discrimination against black American people and black American people's struggle against racial discrimination in *The Hate U Give*.

1. Racial Discrimination Against Black American People in *The Hate U Give*

In *The Hate U Give*, Thomas describes some kinds of racial discrimination against black American people. She deals with racial discrimination against black American people in every aspect of life. In this part, we look at some essential points on racial discrimination experienced by black American people. Thomas depicts four kinds of racial discrimination. They include no access to a good education, no access to good jobs, police brutality, the discriminating acts, and the tragedy of murder, and lack of legal protection.

No Access to a Good Education

In *The Hate U Give*, the author wants to touch on equal opportunity between black people and white people still different. Thomas shows us that there is no access to a good education for black American people, particularly in Garden Heights. Economic factors also have a significant influence on education in America. Black American people are depicted as economically disadvantaged in Garden Heights. Many of them live in poverty. Sadly, because black schools'

funding level is much lower, it is not easy to get good facilities. In Garden Heights, the economic factors between black people and white people show how many black students can not find equality in their schools.

"... So many schools in our neighborhoods do not prepare us well enough. Our school does not get the resources to equip you, as Williamson does. It is easier to find some crack than it is to find a good school around here." (p.78)

It shows how black American students face their education by comparing two contrasting schools. Black American people live in harmful conditions because they are still underdeveloped to access a good education in Garden Heights. Meanwhile, Williamson described a luxurious private school. Most of the students at Williamson are predominantly white people. Williamson provided a good education system for white students. The subject matter, and the facilities are of high quality.

No Access to Proper work

In the novel, Thomas describes the black American people's community as very complicated. She invites us to know black people who live in a region full of gangsters and drug dealers in Garden Heights. She also suggests that being a drug dealer was not the choice of their life. Due to the lack of decent job opportunities, black Americans must choose to work as drug dealers to survive. In other words, the hatred to black Americans is a system designed to harm them in Garden Heights. Thomas shows this condition through Big Mav and Starr in the dialogue following uncle Charles's house.

"He was a drug dealer."

"Why was he a drug dealer? Why are so many people in our neighborhood drug dealers?"

"They need money, and they don't have a lot of other ways to get it."

"Exactly, drugs come from somewhere, and they were destroying our community."

"Right. Lack of opportunities. Corporate America don't bring jobs to our communities. And they damn sure ain't quick to hire us." (p.78)

From the dialogue between Big Mav and Starr, we can understand that many corporate Americans refuse to engage black people in Garden Heights. They tend to consider black American people as criminals. It provides a detailed description of what comes to corporate America's mind. At least they consciously evaluate the black group living in Garden Heights. In other words, the predominantly white companies had prevented black people from being successful.

Police Brutality

In the novel, Thomas depicts police brutality against black people in Garden Heights. As a racial minority, black people are more effortless in targeting police brutality. It is what Big Mav speak up about black people as a racial minority, *"Us who? Black people, minorities, poor people. Everybody at the bottom in society. The Oppressed."* (p.77). This condition is reflected against black people living in Garden Heights who has been oppressed by police. I found out there are two acts of oppressing black people by the police in Garden Heights. They are the act of discrimination and the tragedy of murder.

There are two acts of oppressing black American people by police in Garden Heights, such as discrimination and the tragedy of murder.

The Act of Discrimination

In *The Hate U Give*, Thomas portrays that police brutality often discriminates against black American people without any reason. She wants to convey that structural racism oppresses black American people in Garden Heights, where the police often act on legal grounds to secure the country. However, the act that has emerged is the abuse by the law of black American people. Thomas describes many discriminating actions by the police, such as making threats, forcing searches, shouting harshly, ordering them to lie down inhumanly, and some even with violence. The characters felt this situation, Khalil and Starr when the car suddenly stopped by the police.

“Get out of the car! Hands-on the dashboard!” the officer barks at me, “Don’t move!..He pats Khalil down. One fifteen pats him down two more times. He turns up empty.” (p.15)

This case is not the first time for the police to do something against black people in Garden Heights. Thomas also describes the same treatment toward Starr’s father, Big Mav, when he is standing in front of his shop with Mr. Lewis, Starr, Seven, and other black citizens. Two police officers stopped suddenly in front of the Big Mav shop then committed acts of discrimination.

“You got some I.D. on you? The black cop asks Daddy. “Sir, I was about to go back to my store--”

“I said do you have some I.D. on you?”

“On the ground, face-down!” he yells. “Now!”

“The black officer checks Daddy while his partner glances around at all of the onlookers. The black cop keeps his knee on Daddy’s back as he searches him. He pats him down once, twice, three times, just like One-Fifteen did Khalil. Nothing.” (p.87-88)

Thomas wants to point out that two police officers' discrimination has made black American people to experience worse conditions. Sadly, because Thomas does not only highlight the acts of discrimination committed by white police, black police also do the same treatment against their citizens. This condition depicts how systemic racism works in the police department that oppresses black American people in Garden Heights.

The Murder Tragedy

In the novel, Thomas highlights the issue of racial discrimination by the murder tragedy against Khalil. The racial discrimination shows Khalil’s murder, a black teenager, by white police in Garden Heights. Sadly, Khalil had to lose his life just for being black. There are negative stereotypes against black American people in Garden Heights, where they are pictured as gangsters and drug dealers. White police assumed that Khalil was a drug dealer. Therefore, he was killed Khalil as a criminal.

“Pow, one of Khalil’s body jerks. Blood splatters from his back. He holds on to the door to upright. Pow, two Khalil gasps. Pow, three Khalil, looks at me, stunned. He falls to the ground. I blink through my tears. Officer One-Fifteen yells at me, pointing the same gun he killed my friend with...I’ve seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black, and all hell breaks loose...A sixteen-year-old black boy is dead because a white cop killed him.” (p.15-27)

The Khalil tragedy suggests how the negative stereotypes against black American people indirectly gave legitimacy. The police officers can kill if their lives are threatened. In this condition, it shows that Khalil was killed unarmed. It means that being a black American person

has a high risk of being killed by the police. Garden Heights is depicted with black Americans' environmental conditions where there are gangsters, drug dealers, and ex-convicts. It gave birth to a bad stereotype against black Americans. The situation shows not only in the police department in Garden Heights but also in the local community.

Lack of Legal Protection

In *The Hate U Give*, Thomas describes unfair treatment experienced by black American people to receive legal protection. Racial discrimination makes black American people's life worst than white people's. They did not get justice in the realm of law. Black American people deeply feel this unfair treatment through Starr. Starr witnesses a shooting by white police officer who killed her black friend, Khalil. As a black person, Starr did not get justice for her friend.

"Everything I told them, and they are not arresting him? What they do not want you to know, Ms. Ofrah says, is that Khalil was unarmed at the time of his murder...The police chief appears onscreen and says what I was afraid he would say: we have taken into consideration the evidence as well as the statement given by the witness, and as of now we see no reason to arrest the officer." (p.60-65)

From the quotation above, the law should provide equal treatment to all people from different backgrounds. The law does not treat a black man Khalil who was killed by white police. The law's weakness in handling Khalil's death is a proof that racial discrimination is still rooted in America. Especially, the police department stigmatize that black citizens are criminals in Garden Heights. The police can easily carry out their brutal actions. The action is not taken seriously under the law because it is legitimate.

2. The Struggle of Black American People Against Racial Discrimination in *The Hate U Give*

In *The Hate U Give*, Thomas depicts how racial discrimination against black American people has harmed them in every aspect, including education, employment, legal protection, and even being the target of police brutality. Racial discrimination causes black American people to receive unequal treatment. It is because the history of racism is rooted in America. Here, we want to point out that black American people struggle against racial discrimination in *The Hate U Give* into three discussion sections: the struggle to get a good education, the effort to create good work, and a justice movement.

The Struggle to Get a Good Education

In the novel, Thomas points out how racial discrimination tortures black American people because they cannot access better education in their environment, Garden Heights. The level of knowledge and success so far have only been aimed at white students. Black American students tend to be second to white students. They do not have access to higher education. As a result of this inequality, black American people struggle to get a good education. We can see how Starr's parents send her and her brothers, Seven and Sekani, to Williamson's school. Williamson's school is such a right school for students where white students dominate. By going to school in Williamson, Starr's parents believe that Starr, Seven, and Sekani can get a good education as white children do.

"...so many of the schools in our neighborhoods don't prepare us well enough. That's the way when your momma talked about sending you and your brothers to Williamson, I agreed. Our schools

don't get the resources to equip you like Williamson does." (p.183)

The quotation above shows that the condition of Garden Heights does not provide a good education for them. Therefore, Starr's parents struggle to send Starr, Seven, and Sekani to Williamson at any cost. It means that they can fight racial discrimination in their environment. Here, Thomas shows that Starr's parents struggle to send their children to Williamson is fruitful. The success represents their children as black students who could continue their education to a high school. Seven is a living proof of the success. He managed to continue his schooling to college. It can be seen from Big Mav's conversation with Seven when the Starr family celebrate Seven's birthday at their residence, Garden Heights

"I'm proud of you, man. Like I told you, I never got a diploma. A lot of young brothers don't get theirs. And where we come from, a lot of them don't make it to eighteen. Some do make it, but they're messed up by the time they get there. Not you though. You're going places, no doubt." (p.161)

The quote shows that education is a more essential thing for everyone's future. The novel shows that many black American people did not get diplomas and continue their higher education in Garden Heights. Therefore, Big Mav and his wife try too hard to send their children to Williamson's school. They want their children to have the same opportunities as white children in education. By getting a good education, they can change their children's lives for more better.

The Struggle to Create Proper Work

The racial discrimination against black American people in *The Hate U Give* shows that all black people depicts as gangsters and drug dealers in Garden

Heights. However, not all black people are like that. Here, Thomas shows us that black people are not drug dealers. Starr describes how his father and Mr. Lewis could create good jobs in Garden Heights.

"Daddy parks in front of Carter's Grocery, our family's store. Daddy bought it when I was nine after the former owner, Mr. Wyatt. He was the only person who would hire Daddy when he got out of prison, and he later said Daddy was the only person he trusted to run the store and Mr. Lewis from the barbershop, he gives some of the best haircuts in garden Heights." (p.22)

This is how Thomas responds to the struggle of black American people through her novel. Starr's father and Mr. Lewis are cool black characters who Thomas describes as a reasonable effort and hard work. In showing their struggle, they can change their bad conditions to proper conditions a little bit well in Garden Heights. It is an excellent achievement in fighting against racial discrimination.

A Justice Movement

In the novel, Thomas depicts police brutality and law enforcement's absence in handling Khalil's death cases. White police killed Khalil in Garden Heights. Investigating the possibility of Khalil's death by white police is not complete yet. Many black citizens protested against Khalil's death. They went to the streets to stage massive demonstrations to demand justice. Khalil's death is considered the peak of black people's anger regarding structural discrimination and racist attitudes, particularly against police officers' treatment of black residents in Garden Heights.

"Warmth brushes my face, and I know we're outside. All of the voices and noises make me look. There are

more people out here in the church, holding posters with Khalil's face on them and signs that say "Justice for Khalil." (p.62)

This situation makes them rage because the white police officer who killed a black teenager did not get arrested. It shows how legal politics does not protect black American citizens in America. Starr describes this chaotic situation when she talks with her father, Big Mav, in the following quotation.

"Everybody's pissed cause One-Fifteen hasn't been charged, but also because he's not the first one to do something like this and get away with it. It's been happening, and people will keep rioting until it changes. So, I guess the system's still giving hate, and everybody's still getting fucked? That's about right. And we won't stop getting fucked till it changes. That's the key. It's gotta change." (p.78)

Thomas reveals how law enforcement's absence from handling police brutality against black people in Garden Heights. The protest is an outburst of emotions raised by black people in demanding justice. They just need freedom where they do not get oppressed arbitrarily by the police. Here, Starr conveys the peak of black people's anger as people who suffer from all.

"We weren't doing anything wrong. Not only did Officer Cruise assumes we were up to no good, he assumed we were criminals. Well, Officer Cruise is the criminal...I'm sick of this! Just like y'all think all of us are bad because of some people, we think the same about y'all. Until you give us reason to think otherwise, we'll keep protesting." (p.178).

From the quotation above, it is clear how Thomas, in her novel, changes the situation by creating a justice movement. In Garden Heights, Thomas portrays how

black American people who are vulnerable to losing their lives due to police brutality, experience injustice before the law, and discrimination in every aspect of life. Thomas shows the readers that law enforcement is still weak in providing protection and justice for black people in America. With a justice movement that gives space for these aspirations, black people have the power to keep protesting for justice.

CONCLUSION

The analysis suggests that *The Hate U Give* reflects racial discrimination against black American people. Although the supreme court imposed the Civil Rights Movement in 1960, it aimed to give black Americans rights and eliminate police violence against black Americans. However, racial discrimination still exists and oppresses black American people.

The Hate U Give as a whole depicts the lives of white people and black people separately. In Williamson, white people live a decent life. Meanwhile, black people live in deplorable conditions in Garden Heights. This novel portrays negative stereotypes against black American people in Garden Heights. Black people are considered the most dangerous humans and need to be avoided. It shows that racism still exists, meaning that white people always adhere to strong racial values to treat black people in discrimination.

In this case, the author of this novel uses a literary work to depict black American people's social condition. She expresses her own experiences as a black American. She describes how difficult it is for black Americans to get justice. The results show that equal rights and opportunities are still difficult for black Americans to get. *The Hate U Give* can be seen as part of the resistance against racial discrimination in America.

In the end, after analyzing the novel *The Hate U Give*, we can conclude that racial discrimination against black American people is the most significant problem emerging in modern society today. This novel describes a social condition in which racial discrimination against black Americans occurs. This research suggests that issues of equal opportunity are still complicated in America. Such conditions underlie the emergence of the novel *The Hate U Give*. Besides, the most crucial case is police violence that oppresses black American people. Through Thomas's racial representation in *The Hate U Give*, the importance of a struggle is to end oppression.

REFERENCES

- Blank, Rebecca M, Marilyn Dabady, and Constance F. Citro. 2004. *Measuring racial discrimination*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Print.
- Criss, Doug, and Ford, Dana. "Black Lives Matter Activist Shaun King Addresses Race Reports" *CNN*, Retrieved on August 21, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/20/us/shaun-king-controversy/index.html>
- Feagin, Joe. R. 2006. *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Feagin, Joe, and Vera, Hernan. 1995. *White Racism: The Basics*. New York: Routledge.
- Hill, Evan, et al. 2020. "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody." *The New York Times*, May 31. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.amp.html>.
- Hirsch, Afua. 2017. "Angie Thomas: the debut novelist who turned racism and police violence into a bestseller." *The Guardian*, Sunday, Retrieved on March 26, 2017, <https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/26/angie-thomas-the-debut-novelist-who-turned-racism-and-police-violence-into-a-bestseller>.
- Muzaki, Ahmad. 2018. "Protest Against Stereotypes Threats Reflected in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* novel. Surakarta. P.1-13. Retrieved on 2018.
- Swingewood, Alan, and Diana Laurenson. 1972. *The Sociology of Literature*. London: Granada Publishing Limited.
- Thomas, Angie. 2017. *The Hate U Give*. New York: Harper Collins.