

Institutional Racism and Activism in Thomas's The Hate U Give

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Morrison calls Africanism a 'trope' and a 'virus'; it is the way white Americans take over and mystify the life of the 'unsettled and unsettling population' they can neither accept nor ignore.

ABSTRACT--Bigotry in any form is a state of intense mental, intellectual, spiritual deprivation. The paper focuses on police racism, social injustice, isolation and prevention of Civil Rights to minorities'. The paper aims at exploring how the culture of white racism, approves systemic racism and on the effectiveness of activism 'Just Us for Justice' in reforming the culture of police racism. The paper is on Angie Thomas work *The Hate U Give* (2017), which is about poverty, racism and police brutality. The young person is murdered during a roadside check-up by the young white officer as he supposed the black teen precarious. County officer's deadly shot, in questionable situation raises anger among communities. The paper explores how and why Just Us for Justice combined with engaged resident activism, creatively and effectively engaged in organizing efforts to oppose police racism.

KEYWORDS-- Systemic racism; Police killings; Racism; Social injustice and Activism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century black women writer Angie Thomas (1988) inherits the literary tradition that started with Phillis Wheatley, Harriet A. Jacob, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker, and the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. The fiction *The Hate U Give* is the outcome of a real life incident which killed two vulnerable black teens by police officer in front of Angie Thomas. This was the author's first encounter with police racism that left her wretched and psychologically disturbed. Seeing Thomas's pitiable condition her mother took her to a nearby library where she excavated the factual cause of racism, racial homicide, social injustice and the power of activism. Thomas's unsaid thoughts took the form of a short story which later took the shape of a book with the same title. In a short time, the book got adapted as a movie under Fox 2000 production house. The book is an attempt to fight against institutional racism and social discrimination both in the black and white world through the power of nonviolent activism.

As per the survey it is assumed that: "Of the 15 leading causes of death in the United States, the black white gap is largest for homicide. In 1996, the death rate from homicide for African Americans was 30.6 per 100,000 population- virtually identical to the rate of 30.5 in 1950." (Williams and Collins)

Institutional or systemic racism is a type of discrimination that is articulated in the practice of societal and political organizations. This type of prejudice is reflected in discrepancy concerning valuable possessions,

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earnings, justice, occupation, shelter, medical emergency, political power and edification. The term institutional or systemic racism was used in 1967 by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*.

According to, Stokely and Charles: "Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property. (...) The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type." (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 4)

In a study carried out by "Harvard School of Public Health" in 2017 it is observed that racism still exists in America in a disguised form. "A majority of African Americans also report experiencing multiple forms of individual or interpersonal discrimination, including racial slurs and people making negative assumptions or insensitive or offensive comments about their race." (Harvard) Although, it is believed that blacks have gained racial equity after the Civil Rights Movement, the truth is racial inequality still prevails in the white culture. Some find it useless to fight against it as it seems impossible to achieve racial fairness. "Two things are undeniable: that racial progress in America has been nothing short of astounding and that racial domination in America has yet to be dismantled." (Desmond and Emirbayer)

It is observed that Emmett Till's episode echoes every time a black teen is killed because of racism. In 1955, the black hero Emmett Till was murdered and his body was dumped in the river Tallahatchie. "The 14-year-old from Chicago was visiting the South when he was accused of whistling at a white woman and murdered. His death became a rallying cry for the civil rights movement, but several signs meant to memorialize the killing- including the one on the riverbank between the towns of Glendora, Miss., and Webb, Miss.- have been vandalized by spray paint and bullet holes." (Rogers). And, till date the place where Till's mutilated body was first placed couldn't be marked as a remembrance of the martyr because every time a memorial is placed it is been shot by some unidentified miscreants. "The vandalism has divided residents in a part of the country where 'it doesn't take too much scratching beneath the surface to see that race is still an issue,' Mr. Weems said." (Rogers).

II. DISCUSSION

Starr Carter, the protagonist is a sixteen-year-old cheerful fun loving girl, who seems more confident of what to do as a responsible black citizen against police brutality: "I've seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black, and all hell breaks loose. I've tweeted RIP hashtags, reblogged pictures on Tumblr, and signed every petition out there. I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person, and I'm too afraid to speak." (p. 38)

The fiction opens with a rejuvenating Friday night spring break party which Starr joins with her half-sister Kenya in their neighbourhood. Starr feels lonely as she rarely knows anybody there and was standing in a corner when she saw her childhood friend Khalil. Both were happy to see each other after a long period of time and started chatting when there was sudden sound of gunfire which created chaos in the party and everyone was running hither and thither. Starr and Khalil also ran to his car which was parked nearby and drove far away from the spot. After

reaching a safe zone they started conversing about the things happening in their life when a patrolling van interrupted them. The police with the badge One-Fifteen, ordered Khalil to show his documents and eventually took Khalil out of his car and made him kneel down. Starr was shivering seeing the pistol in the hand of the white officer and remembers her father's word of warning, what to do when armed officer's approach her: "Keep your hands visible. Don't make any sudden moves. Only speak when they speak to you." (p. 24) Starr was sure Khalil knew how to proceed in front of the officers. All of a sudden, Khalil was shot three times by the white officer. It was Starr's second close encounter with death after her friend Natasha who was killed six years back. Khalil was lying in a pool of blood and Starr was sitting motionless in the ambulance when her parents approached her.

Starr remains in a gloomy atmosphere as all her tender moments are shattered into nightmares. "Darkness crawls toward them. I try to warn them, but my voice doesn't work. The shadow swallows them up in an instant. Now it creeps toward me. I back away, only to find it behind me..." (p. 53). Suddenly, Starr woke up and heard arguments between her father and Uncle Carlos about her to be a witness in Khalil's case. Starr's father Maverick does not want further problems in his daughter's life so he opposes Uncle Carlos's suggestion. Subsequently, it was decided that Starr will go to the police station and be an eyewitness to the illegal incident. Being a policeman Uncle Carlos knew that Starr's witness will help to solve the case, so it was decided that she will go to give her statement to police after school. Starr accompanied by her mother went to the police station and narrated the whole incident. The incident imprisoned her mind while the police were interrogating her for several hours. Starr felt that the questioning was more about Khalil than about the white officer's wrong shootout and she was disappointed. When the news spread that Khalil was a suspected drug peddler and an unnamed witness has been found, she was annoyed. The following day started, with a basketball match between boys and girls at Williamson, Starr tries hard to set aside the unpleasant episode but it haunts her and she tries to act normal. Starr felt horrible as she could not expose the truth of her vicinity and converse truly with her close friends Chris, Maya and Hailey. So, she decided to keep away from her white boyfriend Chris, a way to show justice to her dead friend.

On the eighth day of the incident, Khalil's body is handed over to his family for the funeral services. Starr accompanies her parents to attend it but seeing Khalil lying like a mannequin in the casket, evokes the memory of Natasha's stiff dead body lying in front of her. In that confusion she saw the van crowded with people and reporters, there she noticed the distinguished Ms. April O'frah for the first time. Then Ms. O'frah meets Starr and introduces herself as an attorney and activist who fights against police brutality with Just Us for Justice. Starr innocently asks O'frah why One-Fifteen was not arrested, O'frah values Starr's concern and gives her assurance.

After the official statement spreads that the policeman involved in the homicide of Khalil is innocent, the neighbourhood of the Garden Heights turns into a war zone. The demonstrator showed their anger by setting fire to public properties and patrolling vans. "There are at least a hundred people gathered on Magnolia Avenue. They chant for justice and hold signs, fists high in the air for black power." (p. 137) Starr assumes that while recording her statement she might have lost some points for which the guilt officer is not arrested. When Starr's mother figures out her apprehension, she tries to comfort Starr and said that: "Sometimes you can do everything right and things will still go wrong. The key is to never stop doing right." (p. 154)

Ever since, the incident Starr remains in a gloomy atmosphere. Whenever, she comes across a police team her grip tightens and the feeling of helplessness encircles her. Seeing Starr's condition, her father tries to cheer her up and at the same time makes her aware about the truth of the time and their ancestry. Her father Maverick said

that: "Corporate America don't bring jobs to our communities, and they damn sure ain't quick to hire us." (p. 168) So, due to lack of opportunities the black students are remaining unemployed and grasping the easily available option of earning money in an illegal way.

At Williamson, the school opens as a protest day to give justice to Khalil but Starr is indifferent towards it because she knew that the students were doing so to bunk classes. On the other side, Maverick is worried for the old man, Mr. Lewis because Mr. Lewis spoke against King the drug peddler, to the news reporter. But, the old man is least concern as he proudly shows the scars of his injuries which he gained; one for the country's pride and the later for racial segregation. "He lifts up his pants leg, revealing a plaid sock over a prosthetic. 'Lost it in the war. (...)' He lifts his shirt to his underarm. There's a thin pink scar stretching from his back to his swollen belly. 'Got it after some white boys cut me 'cause I drank from their fountain.'" (p. 188). The following day starts with continuous firing of guns followed by declaration of curfews in the neighbourhood. Starr was sitting idle at home when the memories of her innocent friends killed because of racial attacks stimulated her mind and she broke her silence. Starr decided to defend the moral fibre of her dead friend and proceeds with an anti-racial attitude of the new generation. Starr starts an internet blog which contains good memories and pictures of Khalil as a young boy: "The Khalil I Know." (p. 202). And, Starr also decided to take a stance in front of the grand jury in the court of law to validate her friend as an innocent victim with the help of Ms. Ofrah.

When Mr. Lewis was attacked by King, the illegal drug merchant because of DeVante, Starr's father got suspicious of DeVante. The poor teen boy DeVante was staying in Maverick's store. When Maverick questions DeVante about it, he admits that he duped King to help his family. Then Maverick along with Uncle Carlos decided to help DeVante in giving him proper education and shelter. In return, they wanted DeVante to cut off all association from the illegal world and focus all his attention on his education. Starr's mother Lisa is surprised and happy at the decision of her husband and brother but she is worried for her family as Garden Heights is turning into a war zone by each passing day.

When Starr was at her uncle's house Riverton Hills, she went to meet her school friend Maya where her friend Hailey was already there. Hailey's word against Khalil upset Starr so she left Maya's house but Maya being a minority understood Starr and asks for forgiveness. While Starr was with Uncle Carlos she asked him whether he would have killed Khalil if he was in the place of the white officer which his uncle denies. Then, Starr returns home and starts conversing with her mother about love and life. Lisa accompanies Starr to the DA's office where Ms. Ofrah was already present and they meet Ms. Monroe in the conference room. Ms. Monroe shows her concern and wants to give justice to Khalil, so she interrogates Starr regarding the incident which leaves Starr nauseated.

The day finally arrives Starr gives her interview on the National News channel arranged by Ms. Ofrah. Starr knew that the interview would scratch her fresh wound but she decided to get through it in hunt for righteousness. The subsequent day begins with a good response to the TV interview. Ms. Ofrah came to meet Starr and said that a generous person wanted to contribute to her education and hearing it Starr daydreams that one day her godmother Ms. Ofrah will surprise her with a car. It is a great day for Starr as it is their prom night at Williamson and Chris has come to escort her to the party. As the very next day was grand jury trial day, some malicious strangers attempted to create terror in Starr's home. They tried hard to create terror so that, Starr won't go for the trial. But, Maverick was determined for the good cause of her daughter so, in spite of Uncle Carlos warning Maverick got help from King Lords to guard his house instead of police.

It is the most anticipated day for Starr and her family, the grand jury trial day. Starr arrives at the courthouse along with her parents and maternal family under the security of King Lords and his Goon. The moment she enters the courthouse, it evokes her memory as a child when her father was undergoing trial in orange gown and handcuffs. Her father has left the criminal world and wanted to be a virtuous man for the sake of his children so he was undergoing the trial. Starr's parents and everybody else were in another room, only Starr and her attorney Ms. Ofrah stayed in the courtroom. Starr faced bravely all the cross-examination in front of the grand jury and her voice sounded low but she tried to overcome her fear as she remembers her mother's words: "'Brave doesn't mean you're not scared, Starr,' she says. 'It means you go on even though you're scared. And you're doing that.'" (p. 327). Every single detail was answered by Starr and noted down and the most hectic day came to an end. Gradually, two weeks passed without any decision. And things further got messed up when Starr and her brother, fought with Hailey and her brother that resulted in suspension of all for three days.

Maverick is very happy as his eldest son completed his graduation so he was giving him a graduation party on his 18th birthday. The day commence with a cheerful celebration of Starr's brother Seven's birthday party at Uncle Carlos's place. Later, Starr and her whole family shifted to a new house in the suburban locality. Starr received a call from Ms. Ofrah that the jury's decision will be announced in a moment. In her apprehension, Starr went to meet Chris and then Seven called up to say that DeVante was missing. So Starr, Seven and Chris went in search for him to King's house where DeVante was lying on the floor groaning with pain. Seven took DeVante and his sisters along with him to save them from King. On their way home, there was an announcement on the radio that Officer Brian Cruise Jr. won't be prosecuted in Khalil's case. After hearing the news that no legal action will be taken against One-Fifteen, Starr is disheartened and says to Chris that she did everything she could do to give justice to Khalil but failed.

While they were on their way home, Starr meets Ms. Ofrah leading a protest rally for giving justice to Khalil. Ms. Ofrah promotes Starr to speak out all that is hidden in her mind to the crowd and handed her the bullhorn and said that: "You can destroy wood and brick, but you can't destroy a movement." (p. 404) Ofrah's words gave courage to Starr and she stood on the police van with the bullhorn in her hand, she looked at the police team and poured out all her unsaid grieves. "'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 a reason to think otherwise, we'll keep protesting.'" (p. 406). Each word she spoke exposed the racial discrimination and prejudice they were facing, she said: "Daddy once told me there's a rage passed down to every black man from his ancestors, born the moment they couldn't stop the slave masters from hurting their families. Daddy also said there's nothing more dangerous than when that rage is activated.'" (p. 193)

The moment, Starr, Chris, Seven and DeVante were inside Maverick's store some intruder locked them up and set fire to the store. They shouted for help and hearing their scream Mr. Lewis somehow managed to gather people to help them and luckily, all were saved. Maverick got angry after knowing that King's people tried to burn the store and his children but Uncle Carlos stopped him to take any illegal action against the King and his goons. And, Uncle Carlos promised Maverick that he will make sure King is punished by law for fire-starting. Simultaneously, Starr's protest for black integrity continues along with Just Us for Justice, in search of justice. Towards the end, Starr gets positive responses from everybody and is in the headlines of all news channels. "The witness Fights Back" (p. 429). Starr understood that people are remembering Khalil and the cause, so she continues

the protest with hope for a better tomorrow. Starr feels more confident of what to do without being ashamed of her legacy and community.

III. CONCLUSION

Angie Thomas's fiction imitates the century old racial hatred existing in white culture in an enclosed arena. Thomas accomplishes in showing people ways to exercise the ghost of police racism and in doing so the author has brought the individuals and neighbourhood together. Thomas depicts the black teen's absence as the only presence which gives meaning to the book and strength to the protagonist to break her silence. Here, attention is converging upon discussion on the influence of activism on the collective past of community and the memory of the individual through the experience of police racism. Thomas has competently delved into how the traumatic collective reminiscence leads to distorted dreams and urge to fight for justice gives Starr a piece of mind and confidence to proceed in the journey of life. Further, the protagonist tries to defeat the haunting experiences through growing awareness and forbearance.

It is evident that to get a society apart from caste; creed and race, the government should invest in equivalent education and occupation opportunities to both races. Maverick knew that due to societal isolation, lack of proper education and trade growth their people are not getting a good standard of living. Their kids are joining notorious gangs to earn their livelihood and fulfil their dream of material pleasure. As a result, a bunch of hooligans are budding in the neighbourhood that is engulfing their kids. The author shows through Maverick and Carlos that if every black child like DeVante is given a supporter then the less capable will have a bright future.

Subsequent, to the close encounter, stereotypical racial fear takes Starr in its grip. Ms. Ofrah is a ray of anticipation in Starr who points out the necessity of new beginning and faith. In the process to give justice to her childhood friend, Starr overcomes her fear and broadens her focus from her friend to all those victims who were killed because of false assumption and stereotypical racial fear. Starr comprehends the power of voice and is assured that one day they will get justice because people are remembering the cause and challenging the judiciary. Starr is also certain that the flame of activism will keep glowing to bring them justice. It shows that the educated youngsters are trying to convince the crowds to take part in peace rallies rather than riots which is a logical way of fighting against racial injustice and social insecurity. This means that the upcoming generation irrespective of tension between culture and race are willing to accept each other's existence in the larger ecosystem for the fulfilment of American Dream of success.

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