# RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN ANGIE THOMAS' *THE HATE U GIVE* AND NIC STONE'S *DEAR MARTIN*

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**BENIN CITY**

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**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY, IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A) HONOURS IN ENGLISH AND LITERATURE**

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## CERTIFICATION

I certify that this project titled: **Racial Discrimination in Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* And Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*** was undertaken by **Favour Feyisayo Akinniyi** in the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin City, with the matriculation number **ART2100168**.

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**Prof. Mrs. A. O. Eruaga** **Date**

**Project Supervisor**

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to the Almighty God whose presence, support and underserved kindness has carried me from the beginning down to this point. I also dedicate this project to my father Late Mr. Funsho Akinniyi and my mom Mrs. Love Akinniyi, their love, support and encouragement has sustained me throughout my journey in the University of Benin.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines racial discrimination as reflected in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*, two contemporary African American novels that interrogate the lived realities of systemic racism, social inequality, and the struggles of Black youth in America. The research explores how both writers employ fiction as a mirror of society, using young protagonists—Starr Carter and Justyce McAllister—to expose the recurring injustices of police brutality, racial profiling, and the silencing of Black voices. Through the framework of Critical Race Theory, the study investigates how race and power intersect to shape individual and collective experience, while also analysing the use of narrative techniques such as repetition, epistolary form, and point of view in constructing emotional and moral depth. The methodology is qualitative and interpretive, relying on close textual reading and comparative analysis to reveal how both novels humanise the statistics of racial violence by giving them personal and affective dimensions.

Ultimately, this study argues that *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* do not merely recount the pain of Black existence; they reclaim agency through language, resistance, and truth-telling, positioning young Black voices at the centre of America's ongoing discourse on justice and equality.

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how racial discrimination is shown in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*. Both novels focus on the lives of young Black characters who face unfair treatment because of the colour of their skin. The study aims to look closely at how the authors present racism through events such as police violence, biased treatment in schools and society, and the struggles the characters go through as they try to find their place in a world that often judges them harshly. This research also seeks to show how the two novels reflect real-life situations faced by Black people, especially the youth, in the United States. Through this comparison, the study will highlight the message both writers are trying to pass across about race, justice, and the importance of speaking up in the face of oppression.

## 1.2 Scope of the Study

This study is limited to the examination of racial discrimination in Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* . The analysis will be based only on the content of the two novels. Other useful materials will be consulted only to support the discussion where necessary. Broader discussions on racism outside these texts are beyond the scope of this research.

## 1.3 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative method of analysis, which involves a close reading and interpretation of the two African American novels: Thomas' *The Hate U Give* and Stone's *Dear Martin*. The aim is to examine how each novel presents racial discrimination through character development, dialogue, plot, and setting. Particular attention will be paid to the events that reveal racial injustice, the reactions of the characters to these events, and the moral or social lessons that the authors seem to communicate through them. The study will rely mainly on textual analysis. This means the researcher will read the texts carefully, to select instances of racial discrimination and language devices in the novel. In addition to the primary texts, the study will make use of relevant secondary materials such as scholarly articles, books, journals, and credible online sources that will elucidate the points.No survey, experiment, or numerical data will be used in this study. The method is purely literary and interpretive, relying on the researcher's understanding of the texts and the insights drawn from relevant academic discussions.

## 1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study will be grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines the appearance of race and racism across dominant cultural modes of expression. CRT emerged in the mid-1970s, not as an

accidental response, but as a deliberate offshoot of critical legal studies, when scholars and activists like Derrick Bell,

Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Mari Matsuda grew discontent with the slow pace and limitations of traditional civil rights approaches. Bell, who was one of the first tenured African American professors at Harvard Law School, had earlier noted that racism is not a deviation but rather a permanent feature of American society (Bell 3). His critical writings, including Race, Racism and American Law, served as one of the earliest blueprints for CRT's ideological foundation. CRT holds as its central tenet the idea that racism is ingrained in the fabric and system of American society.

Legal scholars like Delgado and Stefancic note that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but is embedded in legal systems and policies (Delgado and Stefancic 7). The theory further proposes that white supremacy and racial power are maintained over time and that the law may play a role in this process. Importantly, it offers a platform for the voices of those historically silenced, employing what is often termed "counter-storytelling" as a means of challenging dominant narratives and assumptions (Crenshaw 25). Over time, CRT has expanded beyond law and legal studies, finding expression in education, literature, sociology, and cultural studies.

Scholars like Tara J. Yosso have extended its application in the field of education, introducing the concept of "community cultural wealth" to challenge traditional notions of cultural capital and bring to the fore the experiential knowledge of marginalised groups (Yosso 17). In literary criticism, CRT offers a potent framework for dissecting characterisation, narrative voice, setting, and power dynamics along racial lines. This study makes deliberate use of CRT to analyse the racial experiences of the central characters in *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin*. In both novels, Black protagonists encounter the reality of racial profiling, police brutality, and institutional neglect. CRT provides the analytical vocabulary to interrogate these experiences not as isolated incidents, but as outcomes of a deeply racialised social structure. The protagonists' voices, their anger, confusion, and moments of resistance are examples of counter-storytelling that challenge mainstream assumptions about Black youth in America. The utility of CRT in this context lies in its emphasis on experiential knowledge as legitimate and critical to understanding racial subordination.

According to Gloria Ladson-Billings, who introduced CRT into the realm of education, narratives are essential to understanding how race and racism operate in everyday life (Ladson-Billings 20). This helps make sense of the fictional yet piercingly real experiences of characters like Starr Carter and Justyce McAllister.

Both protagonists must navigate educational, legal, and social spaces that are not only indifferent to their realities but often hostile to them.

Seminal texts like Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement, edited by Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, have been pivotal in shaping the scholarly reception of CRT in academic circles (Crenshaw et al. 13). More recent contributors like Cheryl Harris, in her concept of "Whiteness as Property," deepen the understanding of how race privileges manifest materially and psychologically in both societal and fictional domains (Harris 171). Patricia Williams, with her intersection of storytelling and legal critique in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, also expands the CRT lens into literary criticism (Williams 9). Notably, CRT has sparked academic debates and received backlash, particularly in political and legislative spaces, which ironically reinforces its relevance. Its inclusion in this study affirms that literature is not divorced from reality. Fiction can mirror truth, and in the hands of authors like Angie Thomas and Nic Stone, storytelling becomes a form of protest and a plea for justice. This research will also engage with the works of scholars like Solórzano, Dixson, Gillborn, Leonardo, and Allen, who have contributed extensively to the theory's modern applications in education, power relations, and cultural interpretation. Solórzano, for example, argues that CRT in education reveals how racism is both deeply

entrenched and often subtle, perpetuated through supposedly race-neutral policies (Solórzano 121).

Dixson and Rousseau advocate for a continued interrogation of whiteness and meritocracy as often unchallenged ideals (Dixson and Rousseau 36). In the literary field, Gillborn maintains that CRT helps decode how narratives sustain dominant racial ideologies, while Leonardo pushes for a "whiteness unmarked" approach in understanding systemic dominance (Leonardo 149). In contemporary literary research, CRT helps to examine how fiction reflects and contests racialised power. As such, this study will interpret the texts as racial counter-narratives, giving voice to suppressed perspectives and challenging the neutrality of mainstream discourse. The racialised experiences of Starr and Justyce will be read not merely as plot devices but as politically charged representations of the Black American condition.

In conclusion, Critical Race Theory is not only an appropriate framework for this study—it is an essential one. It provides both the lens and the language for evaluating how racial identities, injustices, and resistances are portrayed in literature. In doing so, it affirms literature's role in questioning social inequality and amplifying silenced voices.

## 1.5 Review of Related Scholarship

Scholarly discourse on the depiction of racial discrimination in contemporary African American young adult literature has grown significantly in the past decade. In examining *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin*, it is imperative to delve into the existing body of work that has attempted to explore, interpret, or interrogate the themes of racism, marginalisation, identity negotiation, and the politics of resistance as depicted in these texts. This section surveys a breadth of scholarship that forms the academic bedrock upon which the current study is built. Each scholarly voice is considered for both its merit and its limitations, particularly in how it relates to the critical framework and focus of this research.

Gloria Ladson-Billings is often credited with laying the foundational work for Critical Race Theory in education, but in the realm of literary studies, her ideas about how race intersects with pedagogy have inspired many critics to consider the role of literature in shaping consciousness about social injustice. Although her work was not situated within fiction analysis per se, her seminal thoughts encourage a rethinking of narrative as a form of racial advocacy (Ladson-Billings 19).

In a focused literary context, Amber P. Jones' article "Police Brutality and the Resilient Black Youth in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* offers a compelling lens on the representation of Black trauma and protest. Jones considers the novel as a contemporary Bildungsroman and discusses Starr's political awakening. However, her analysis tends to lean heavily on Starr's personal identity development and less on the communal structures of systemic injustice which this current study seeks to foreground (Jones 54).

Similarly, Ashley Hope Pérez's review in *The English Journal* praises *The Hate U Give* for its classroom relevance and emotional resonance, citing its "authentic voice and culturally coded dialogues" (Pérez 63). Her review is illuminating but lacks theoretical grounding and fails to interrogate the structures that produce and perpetuate police violence. Thus, while she celebrates the pedagogical value of the novel, she does not probe the deeper racial dynamics that underpin the text. A more theoretically grounded contribution comes from Meghan Gilbert-Hickey and Miranda A. Green-Barteet in their edited volume *Mediated Youth: Race, Gender, and Class in the Twenty-First Century*. One chapter in the volume, written by Denise Delgado, reads *Dear Martin* as a text that speaks back to canonical authority, especially through its intertextual engagement with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings (Delgado 112). Delgado rightly highlights how Justyce McAllister uses journaling as a form of protest and identity reconstitution. However, the chapter does not sufficiently analyse the structural silence

surrounding white complicity or examine the psychological weariness inflicted by racial profiling.

Julian Kevon Glover's essay, though originally rooted in cultural studies, investigates "the embodied experience of race in public space" and could be extrapolated to understand Starr's and Justyce's spatial anxieties (Glover 91). Yet, Glover's approach privileges adult Black male experiences and misses the nuanced vulnerability and fluidity of adolescent Black subjectivity, which this study seeks to centralise. Patricia Hill Collins, in her theoretical work on intersectionality, provides the conceptual apparatus for understanding the compound oppressions experienced by young Black characters. While she does not write directly about these novels, her framework is instructive in mapping how Starr's identity as a Black female adolescent in an economically disadvantaged neighbourhood intersects with the legal and social systems she navigates (Collins 205). This study intends to extend her argument by applying it to adolescent male experiences as well, particularly through Justyce's journey in *Dear Martin*.

Michelle Alexander's The New Jim Crow has often been cited in discussions of racial discrimination and mass incarceration. Her documentation of how Black men are systematically criminalised is reflected in Justyce's wrongful arrest and Starr's community's relationship with law enforcement (Alexander 144).

Nevertheless, Alexander's legalistic tone and focus on adult incarceration systems do not adequately address the everyday microaggressions and emotional labour endured by Black teenagers, which this study intends to foreground.

A recent contribution from Brian Richardson in *Narrative Theory and the Crisis of Race* offers a structuralist reading of contemporary Black narratives. His assertion that modern African American fiction disrupts traditional linear storytelling aligns with Thomas's use of split chronology and news media interruption in *The Hate U Give*. Still, Richardson's emphasis on postmodern narrative form diverts attention from the ethical and political charge of the texts under consideration (Richardson 72). Furthermore, Carmen Kynard's exploration of literacy, race, and resistance in her essay "From Candy Girls to Cyber Sista-Cipher" offers a dynamic reading of how young Black voices can reappropriate narrative power (Kynard 158). Her linguistic attention to Black vernacular informs this study's consideration of the novel's dialogic tone and voice. However, her study is situated within digital texts and therefore requires careful adaptation when applied to printed fiction.

A more Intersectional and contemporary analysis comes from Ebony Elizabeth Thomas in *The Dark Fantastic*. She argues that Black characters in speculative and realistic fiction are often "sacrificial and tragic figures"

(Thomas 104). In her brief mention of *The Hate U Give*, Thomas notes how Starr resists this trope by surviving and speaking up. Yet, Thomas's sweeping scope across genres means her analysis of each individual work is somewhat surface-level. This study, by contrast, anchors its critique in the particularity of each character's racial and psychological formation. Deborah E. McDowell, though writing earlier in *The Changing Same*, interrogates how African American women writers redefine the moral expectations placed upon Black characters (McDowell 132). This insight becomes useful when understanding how Starr defies the role of the silent or compliant witness. McDowell's framework, however, requires adaptation when extended to Justyce's gendered reality.

To bring it to a more contemporary register, Ruth Nicole Brown's research into Black girlhood and empowerment underscores how activism and literacy become intertwined in youth culture (Brown 187). Her ethnographic work, though not literary in nature, offers relevant background on how youth-led resistance such as Starr's finds cultural legitimacy. Her scholarship, however, is not sufficiently textual for a literary analysis and lacks the depth of narrative critique that this project demands.

Finally, this study engages with Charlene Carruthers's Unapologetic: *A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, which although not a literary text, outlines the importance of unapologetic truth-telling as a strategy of

resistance (Carruthers 91). Starr's refusal to remain silent about Khalil's murder, and Justyce's journals to Dr. King, both become modes of this resistance. Carruthers, however, focuses more on activism than on storytelling or character formation, which limits the direct applicability of her work to the narrative strategies of these novels.

What emerges across this scholarship is a recognition of the power of narrative to contest racial oppression, but also a critical gap in attention to the literary mechanics and emotional interiority of adolescent resistance in the face of discriminatory systems. While each of the scholars mentioned above contributes meaningfully to the discourse, this present study seeks to bridge these gaps by offering a thematically rich and narratologically precise reading of *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin*, informed by Critical Race Theory, narrative theory, and intersectional consciousness.

**1.6 Thesis Statement:**

This essay examines racial discrimination, language devices and the effect of racism in the society in Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*

## CHAPTER TWO

## INSTANCES OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE NOVELS

Racial discrimination remains one of the most pressing realities in American society, and nowhere is it more visible than in the daily experiences of young African Americans as they confront policing, education, and the broader justice system. Both Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* illustrate this discrimination with unflinching clarity, grounding their narratives in the lived experiences of young Black protagonists whose lives are disrupted by encounters with racialised violence. In Thomas's novel, Starr Carter becomes the sole witness to the fatal shooting of her childhood friend Khalil by a white police officer, a moment that lays bare the systemic failure to treat Black lives as equal. As Starr recalls,

"He was unarmed. He didn't do anything. It's not right" (*The Hate U Give* 29).

The language of her testimony captures the helplessness and moral outrage of communities that watch justice slip away in plain sight. Stone's *Dear Martin* presents a parallel injustice when Justyce McAllister, despite being a top student at his preparatory school, is racially profiled and handcuffed without cause. His reflection is sharp in its irony:

"It didn't matter that I had a 4.0 GPA and full ride to Yale. To them, I was just another Black guy in handcuffs

. To them, I was just another Black guy in handcuffs" (*Dear Martin* 17).

These voices set the tone for the chapter's analysis by underscoring the novels' shared critique of racial discrimination: a structure that criminalises innocence, erases truth, and deepens the historical wounds of injustice.

## 2.1 Violence and the Criminalisation of Black Bodies in the System in *The Hate U Give*

One of the most powerful themes in *The Hate U Give* is how the justice system consistently fails Black communities, especially young Black men, by criminalising them before they are even heard. The murder of Khalil, which sets off the story, is not an isolated event. It is a reflection of a wider system where law enforcement officers are trained, either explicitly or implicitly, to view Black youth as threats first, and human beings second. The novel opens our eyes to the

trauma of being Black and constantly fearing the police. Starr narrates the night of Khalil's death in heartbreaking detail. The way she recounts the moment he was pulled over and then gunned down is not just emotional — it is political, and a critique of America's justice system.

> "He doesn't even flinch. Khalil just looks at me, then at the cop. 'What's going on?' 'Get out the car, now!' Khalil opens the door to get out. 'Keep your hands visible!' the cop yells. Khalil's hands stay up. He uses his elbows to shut the door. 'He didn't have to pull me out like that' Then, everything happens so fast. I scream. A shot rings out. Khalil drops. Blood splatters from his back. He holds his hands up. 'He shot me.' One more shot. Khalil gasps" (*The Hate U Give* 24–25).

This single scene captures the raw and unjust way Black lives are endangered under the guise of policing. Khalil is not armed. He is cooperative. Yet he is perceived as dangerous. The officer does not offer him the benefit of doubt. Instead, the assumption of guilt leads to a fatal decision — one that echoes the real-life deaths of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and countless others. What is worse is how the legal system reacts after Khalil's murder. The police officer who shoots him is protected by a system designed to excuse violence against Black people. This is where the justice system fails — not only in action, but in how it responds. Starr reflects on this bitterly: "At first, I think I imagined it. Then I realize it's real. A motherfucking grand jury has decided not to indict the cop who

killed my friend. They're saying he did nothing wrong. Nothing. My blood pounds in my ears. My hands shake. My whole body shakes. I thought the worst feeling was seeing someone die. I was wrong. The worst is when it's announced that no one will be punished for it" (*The Hate U Give* 284).

This passage shows the second form of violence which is institutional silence. When the grand jury refuses to indict the officer, it sends a message to Starr and her community that their pain does not matter. Their lives do not matter. The novel forces us to confront this injustice with honesty.

The language used in these scenes is not filled with legal jargon or statistics. Instead, it is personal. That is the strength of *The Hate U Give*. It allows us to enter the mind and heart of a young Black girl who must carry the burden of a country that constantly undermines her worth.

This critique continues as Starr tries to explain the injustice to her white schoolmates as many of them do not understand why Khalil's death matters. Hailey, in particular, dismisses Starr's anger, reflecting how often white privilege blinds people from recognising systemic racism. Starr's voice grows louder not just in volume, but in conviction. "People like us in situations like this become hashtags, but they rarely get justice. 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" (*The Hate U Give* 169).

Here, Thomas underscores the emotional weight of injustice. Starr does not just witness Khalil's death — she must carry the truth in a world that tries to silence her. The line "people like us become hashtags" is a sharp critique of how Black pain is often reduced to moments of online outrage, without actual change.

**2.2 Police Brutality and the Criminalisation of Black Youths**

In Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, one of the most disturbing realities it exposes is the brutality with which Black youth are policed and how quickly the society criminalises them without trial. Starr Carter, the novel's protagonist, witnesses firsthand the harrowing effects of such systemic violence when her childhood friend, Khalil, is gunned down by a white police officer. What makes this killing particularly egregious is not merely the act itself, but the machinery that immediately sets itself in motion to justify it. From media portrayals to police statements and public opinion, everything is shaped to paint Khalil as dangerous—an image that is both constructed and weaponised. The moment of Khalil's death is relayed through Starr's traumatised memory, but Thomas offers a sober and steady lens to help us see how state power dehumanises Black boys:

"He holds his hands up. One second he's staring at the sky, and the next he's gone.

A shot. Khalil drops. Blood splatters from his back. He hits the ground with a thud. I scream." (*The Hate U Give* 24)

The finality of that thud, the sheer speed of escalation, reveals the absence of hesitation when Black lives are perceived as threats. Thomas's choice of the present tense immerses us in Starr's terror, making the horror immediate and inescapable. There is no pause, no second thought—the bullet follows the assumption of guilt. The language is simple, stripped, and almost journalistic, which underscores the raw injustice of what has happened.

From this point onward, Khalil is no longer a person in the eyes of the system. He becomes a headline. He becomes a suspect in retrospect. Starr reflects bitterly on this transformation: "Khalil was unarmed. Yet the cops and the news are all trying to tell me he was dangerous. Like being Black automatically makes him a thug." (*The Hate U Give* 52)

Here, Thomas is not merely highlighting prejudice but demonstrating how the mechanisms of institutional racism work swiftly to cleanse the conscience of white authority figures. The media is not innocent either; it functions as an extension of state power by reframing the victim as deserving of his fate. Khalil's past—real or imagined—is retrofitted to rationalise his murder. As Starr aptly says, "They always try to justify killing us" (*The Hate U Give* 113).

This criminalisation is not a new phenomenon, nor is it confined to fiction.

Scholars like Michelle Alexander in The New Jim Crow and Khalil Gibran Muhammad in The Condemnation of Blackness have extensively documented how Black youths are disproportionately treated as inherent threats in American public discourse and legal structures. Angie Thomas translates this sociological reality into literary form by giving it a face and a voice through Khalil and Starr.

Starr's father, Maverick, offers an intergenerational commentary on the issue when he warns her about the vulnerability of Black lives: "That's the problem. We let people say stuff, and they say it so much that it becomes okay to them and normal for us. What's the point of having a voice if you're gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn't be?" (*The Hate U Give* 252)

The quote is not only a call to action but an indictment of societal complacency. Maverick's voice, rooted in lived experience, acts as a counter-narrative to the official scripts spun by police departments and news outlets. His insight into the manipulation of language and silence echoes a deeper truth: that justice, when it comes to Black youth, is often determined not by facts but by who controls the narrative.

Thomas also uses Starr's internal conflict to shed light on the psychological toll of witnessing police brutality and surviving it. She carries the guilt of being the

only witness, the only person who can testify, and yet fears that even her truth will not be enough: "It's not about how Khalil died. It's about the fact that he lived. His life mattered." (*The Hate U Give* 299)

This is a powerful moment. Starr moves from being a passive observer of injustice to reclaiming Khalil's humanity in the face of dehumanisation. It is not the death that defines Khalil, but his life—an act of narrative resistance. In that, Thomas empowers Starr to reclaim the story, to shift the public memory from criminalisation to remembrance. Thus, *The Hate U Give* deconstructs the myth of Black criminality by revealing how systemic power structures aggressively impose that myth to excuse their own violence. Through a deft mixture of personal trauma, family wisdom, and community activism, Angie Thomas shows us how a single act of brutality resonates far beyond the bullet, reshaping lives, hardening fears, and fuelling protest.

In this way, Thomas writes against silence. She writes against forgetting. She writes Khalil back into history—not as a thug, not as a drug dealer, not as a case file—but as a human being whose death exposes the soul-wounding, structure-deep nature of police brutality in America.

### 2.3 Violence and the Criminalisation of Black Youths in *Dear Martin*

Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* takes readers beyond the physical realities of racism to expose the deep psychological harm suffered by Black youths in America. Racial profiling does not only provoke fear or irritation—it corrodes the psyche, fosters mistrust in societal structures, and implants in Black children a premature awareness of their vulnerability. Thomas crafts a narrative where the emotional weight borne by the protagonist, Starr Carter, illustrates the silent and lasting trauma caused by racialised policing.

Starr Carter's life is split between two worlds: her mostly Black, impoverished neighbourhood of Garden Heights, and the predominantly white prep school, Williamson. This dual existence already creates tension, but it is the constant reminder that her skin colour makes her a target that truly haunts her. After witnessing the fatal shooting of Khalil by a white police officer, Starr becomes a living canvas for trauma. Her mind is flooded with memories, flashbacks, and self-doubt, while her body becomes a battleground of anxiety and survival instincts.

In the days following Khalil's death, Starr confesses her emotional fragility: "Sometimes my stomach cramps so bad I don't think I'll make it to the bathroom. I try to smile when people ask me if I'm okay, but really I want to scream. I can't

sleep, and if I do, I see him. I see him lying in the street, bleeding out. I hear the gunshot. I hear myself screaming" (*The Hate U Give* 113).

This passage reveals the involuntary way trauma embeds itself into the body. Starr is not merely grieving; she is reliving the horror cyclically. Her insomnia, stomach cramps, and intrusive memories are all symptoms of post-traumatic stress—a disorder deeply rooted in the lived Black experience. Thomas offers no metaphor here; the pain is direct, unapologetic, and palpable.

Starr's trauma is intensified by the burden of silence. She initially chooses anonymity in public discussions about Khalil's murder, not because she lacks courage, but because she fears the societal backlash, the questioning of her character, and the implications for her family. This psychological

dilemma—between truth-telling and self-preservation—is the inheritance of many Black youths forced to witness or endure state violence. Starr puts it plainly: "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" (*The Hate U Give* 135).

The irony here is tragic. Starr's voice is stolen by a system that weaponises silence. Thomas suggests that racial trauma is not only about what is done to the body but also what is done to the soul—how fear rewires one's natural instincts

and replaces conviction with caution. Even when Starr tries to carry on with her life at Williamson, she is haunted by the social disconnection caused by

racialisedexperiences. Her white classmates attempt to show sympathy for Khalil's death, but their protests are performative, lacking emotional depth. Starr observes: "They're using Khalil. I've been quiet long enough. It's hard keeping it in when I know the truth" (*The Hate U Give* 218).

Her trauma is not just personal but is exacerbated by the fact that her reality is constantly erased or simplified by others. Her pain becomes a spectacle rather than a truth that demands justice. Thomas positions Starr as the moral compass in a world eager to look away. Ultimately, Starr's healing begins when she refuses to be silenced any longer. Speaking out becomes both an act of rebellion and a method of psychological release. Still, the novel never suggests that healing is easy or linear. Even as she testifies and protests, the scars remain. The psychological toll is not undone by justice, especially in a world where the officer responsible is never indicted. Thus, Thomas refuses any simplistic resolution. She demands that the reader sit with Starr's trauma, and by extension, the trauma of countless Black youths whose stories rarely make the news.

### 2.4 Racial Profiling and Wrongful Assumptions in *Dear Martin*

In *Dear Martin*, Nic Stone presents racial profiling as one of the most destructive forms of injustice Black youth face in America. The novel opens with Justyce McAllister being arrested and handcuffed by Officer Castillo while trying to help his intoxicated girlfriend get home safely. The scene demonstrates how Black bodies are read as criminal before their actions are even considered. Justyce recalls the humiliation vividly:

*"*The officer shoved him onto the ground, yanked his arms behind him, and slapped cold metal cuffs around his wrists. 'You're under arrest,' Castillo barked, even though Justyce hadn't done anything wrong" (*Dear Martin 9*).

This moment establishes how prejudice works not through evidence but through assumption. The police officer does not see a young man assisting a friend; he sees a dangerous Black male, presumed guilty before innocent. As Justyce reflects, *"No matter what I do, I'll always be seen as a threat"* (*Dear Martin* 11). His words echo the painful truth that identity is criminalised before it is understood.

The wrongful assumptions about Black youth in *Dear Martin* also mirror those in *The Hate U Give*. Just as Khalil is portrayed in the media as a "thug" rather than an innocent victim, Justyce is reduced to a stereotype rather than recognised for his humanity. When his arrest makes the news, the narrative centres not on his innocence but on suspicion about his character. As he bitterly notes, *"*They don't

see Justyce McAllister, debate champ and top of the class. They see some Black kid with potential to be a criminal*"* (*Dear Martin* 13).

Stone deliberately places this early in the novel to reveal how systemic racism collapses individuality into a single, threatening image. This is not only an attack on the legal presumption of innocence but also on the possibility of self-definition.

Justyce struggles with this when he writes to Dr. King, asking:

*"*What do I do when my very existence is taken as a threat? How do I live in a world that decides who I am before I open my mouth?*"* (*Dear Martin* 17). These questions underline the depth of racial profiling as not just a legal injustice but also a psychological wound. It erodes confidence, steals dignity, and plants doubt in young people who should otherwise be allowed to grow and define themselves.

By showing how racial profiling works on both external and internal levels, *Dear Martin* expands the conversation begun in *The Hate U Give*. Starr Carter and Justyce McAllister both find themselves placed under a hostile gaze that predetermines guilt. What Stone adds is the rawness of internal dialogue, the mental struggle of living with the knowledge that innocence cannot shield one from suspicion.

### 2.5 The Courtroom and the Failure of Equal Justice in *Dear Martin*

The courtroom in *Dear Martin* functions not as a sanctuary of fairness but as a stage where prejudice is rehearsed under the cloak of law. Nic Stone demonstrates that legal institutions which ought to uphold equality instead reproduce the very injustices they are meant to combat. The trial of Officer Garrett Tison, who shot Justyce's best friend Manny Rivers, exposes the hollowness of promises of "equal justice under law." "Even dead, Manny couldn't escape the story they wrote about him" (*Dear Martin* 193)

When Tison is brought to trial, Justyce hopes for an outcome that will affirm his faith in the justice system. Yet the arguments presented by the defence reflect the same racial assumptions that shaped his own earlier arrest. The defence attorney frames Tison as a man acting out of fear, a fear supposedly "reasonable" given the racialised stereotypes of young Black men. Manny's death is explained not as a result of unlawful police aggression but as a tragic accident caused by Tison's instinctive response. The prosecutor's efforts to establish guilt are weakened by the unspoken but powerful narrative that Manny and Justyce were dangerous before they even entered the officer's line of sight. Justyce observes this distortion bitterly: *"They painted Manny like some menace and Tison like a hero who barely made it out alive"* (*Dear Martin* 168).

In this telling, the victim is made culpable while the perpetrator is cloaked with sympathy. This reversal mirrors what Bryan Stevenson calls "the politics of fear

and anger" that infiltrates courtrooms, tilting them against racial minorities (Stevenson 22). The courtroom does not erase bias; it codifies it.

The judge's instructions to the jury further exemplify how the language of the law bends toward protecting authority. Though Manny was unarmed and Justyce posed no threat, the jury is told to consider whether Officer Tison's fear was

"reasonable." This question, deceptively neutral, shifts the focus away from the facts of the shooting and onto the subjective state of mind of the officer. As Justyce later reflects, "It wasn't about Manny's life. It was about whether a white cop could say he was scared and walk free*"* (*Dear Martin* 170). The verdict confirms his fears. Officer Tison is acquitted. Manny's life is not weighed with dignity but dismissed under a legal loophole that makes Black death almost unpunishable.

Justyce summarises the despair of this outcome: *"It didn't matter what the truth was. It mattered what they wanted to believe"* (*Dear Martin* 173).

This statement crystallises the novel's central critique of the justice system: that the truth of events cannot always survive the filter of racial prejudice. The law, in theory colour-blind, in practice affirms the very hierarchies it is supposed to dismantle.

In aligning Justyce's experience with broader historical realities, Stone shows how the courtroom becomes an extension of racial profiling. The "reasonable fear" defence is not just a legal technicality but a mechanism by which systemic racism is legitimised. As legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues, *"The courtroom has become less a site of justice and more a site where racial stigma is laundered into legal precedent"* (Alexander 111). *Dear Martin* illustrates this laundering with painful clarity.

By placing Justyce in the courtroom as both witness and victim of injustice, the novel reveals how fragile justice is when filtered through prejudice. The courtroom, far from resolving the wound of Manny's death, deepens it. For Justyce, it becomes clear that the system itself cannot be trusted to protect him. In his words: *"*If this is justice*,* I don't want it*"* (*Dear Martin* 175).

Thus, the novel demonstrates that the law's failure is not accidental but structural, rooted in centuries of racialized suspicion and legal distortions that continue to define the lives of young Black men in America.

### 2.6 Media Representation and the Battle over Narrative in *Dear Martin*

In *Dear Martin*, Nic Stone underscores how the media functions as a powerful arena where truth is distorted, identities are reshaped, and racial injustice is either disguised or reinforced. The way Manny's death and Justyce's presence are

reported by the press demonstrates how news outlets control the narrative, privileging certain voices while silencing others. Instead of amplifying the truth of what occurred, the media often reduces the event to stereotypes that fit comfortably within America's racial imagination. "I turned on the TV and couldn't recognize the story they were telling—it wasn't my truth" (*Dear Martin 174)*

After Manny's death, news reports immediately portray the incident as the result of reckless behaviour rather than unlawful violence. Journalists focus on the altercation leading to the shooting, exaggerating the supposed threat Manny and Justyce posed. As Justyce bitterly observes:

*"*They're saying Manny was out of control and that I was egging him on. Like we were some hoodlums looking for trouble*"* (*Dear Martin* 161). This description reverses victim and aggressor, echoing what Stuart Hall describes as the media's role in "amplifying deviance" when representing Black individuals (Hall 239). Instead of recognising Manny as a victim of state violence, the press reconstructs him as a stereotype: dangerous, reckless, and complicit in his own death.

The language of the reports demonstrates how media framing participates in what Patricia Hill Collins calls the "controlling images" of Black life (Collins 67). Manny is no longer a promising student with a bright future but reduced to the image of a Black youth who invites danger. In the same way, Justyce is portrayed

not as a scholar at the top of his class but as an agitator whose behaviour explains his encounters with law enforcement. The media reshapes their humanity into a simplified caricature designed for public consumption. Justyce himself reflects on this distortion in a moment of frustration: *"*They're not telling the truth. It's like they've made up a story that fits what they think about us already*"* (*Dear Martin* 164).

Here, Nic Stone shows how media does not merely report facts but actively selects, edits, and rewrites reality in a way that protects dominant narratives. The story becomes less about Manny's unlawful death and more about how two Black boys supposedly endangered themselves.

This distortion is not incidental but systemic. The media functions as a cultural weapon, shaping how the public interprets justice. The acquittal of Officer Tison is made easier by this narrative framing: if Manny is already portrayed as dangerous, then Tison's fear appears justified. As media theorist Robert Entman explains, framing "defines problems, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgments, and suggests remedies" (Entman 52). In *Dear Martin*, framing ensures that Manny's death is not seen as a problem of state violence but of youthful recklessness.

The coverage also reveals how quickly Black voices are excluded from the public conversation. Justyce's attempts to speak the truth are drowned out by the louder

megaphone of mainstream outlets. In a poignant reflection he states: *"*I wanted to shout, to tell them what really happened. But nobody was listening*"* (*Dear Martin* 166). This silencing demonstrates the double burden placed on Black victims: not only do they suffer injustice, but they are denied the authority to narrate their own stories. Their voices are displaced by journalists, commentators, and officials who reproduce familiar stereotypes rather than engage with lived realities.

Stone thus illustrates how the media is not a neutral mirror but an active participant in racial injustice. By controlling which details are amplified and which are erased, news outlets maintain a racial hierarchy of credibility. Manny's future at Yale, his leadership, and his humanity are pushed aside, while his Blackness becomes the dominant fact of his identity in the narrative.

The effect on Justyce is profound. The misrepresentation deepens his disillusionment with the very society he has worked so hard to integrate into. After years of excelling academically and striving for respectability, he discovers that the media's gaze reduces him to the same stereotype it applies to every Black youth. As he reflects: *"*No matter what I do, no matter how hard I work, they'll still see me the same way*"* (*Dear Martin* 168). In this sense, the media becomes a mirror of systemic racism rather than a platform for justice. Its distortions are not minor inaccuracies but structural reinforcements of the very biases that fuel police violence and courtroom injustice.

By weaving media coverage into the narrative of *Dear Martin*, Nic Stone makes it clear that battles for racial justice are not only fought in the streets or in courtrooms but also in the arena of representation. Who tells the story, and how it is told, can shape whether justice is pursued or denied. In a society where images often outweigh facts, the media becomes another barrier young Black men must struggle against.

# CHAPTER THREE

# LANGUAGE AND LITERARY DEVICES IN THE NOVELS

## 3.1 **Introduction**

Literature often reveals its greatest force not only through its themes but through the tools of language by which those themes are expressed. In *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin*, Angie Thomas and Nic Stone rely on a wide range of literary devices to present racial discrimination and its impact on young Black lives. Among the most prominent are repetition, epistolary form, and point of view, which structure the way the narrative is told and how readers engage with it. In

addition, devices such as imagery, symbolism, dialogue, code-switching, and silence deepen the representation of trauma, resistance, and identity.

By employing **repetition**, Thomas and Stone recreate the patterns of violence and injustice that plague their characters, making the persistence of racial prejudice both visible and memorable. The epistolary form in *Dear Martin*, through Justyce's letters to Dr. King, becomes a space for reflection and dialogue across time, while in *The Hate U Give* the testimonial mode of Starr's first-person narration functions as a parallel form of witness. Similarly, the choice of point of view—Starr narrating her experience and Justyce oscillating between narration and written letters—ensures that the voices of Black youth are not mediated by outsiders but presented directly to the reader.

The power of these devices lies not in their ornamentation but in their ability to bring the urgency of racial injustice into sharper focus. Repetition drives home the relentlessness of oppression; epistolary form bridges private pain and public discourse; and point of view affirms the authority of the marginalised voice. Together, these devices reinforce the argument that language itself becomes a site of resistance, allowing Thomas and Stone to reclaim the narrative of Black suffering and transform it into testimony, protest, and hope.

### 3.2 Narrative Voice and Structural Devices

The first group of devices to be examined are those that shape the narrative voice and structure of the novels. These include repetition, epistolary form, and point of view. Each of these techniques not only gives shape to the stories of Starr Carter and Justyce McAllister but also determines how readers perceive their struggles. Through repetition, the authors emphasise the recurring nature of racial injustice; through the epistolary form, they carve out spaces for private reflection and dialogue across generations; and through point of view, they affirm the right of Black youth to tell their own stories without mediation.

#### 3.2.1 Repetition

Repetition is one of the most striking devices both Thomas and Stone employ to capture the weight of racial injustice and its lingering presence in the lives of their young protagonists. In *The Hate U Give*, Thomas relies on repeated phrases to underscore the traumatic impact of Khalil's death on Starr Carter. After witnessing the shooting, Starr's narration circles around the same unbearable truth: "One. Khalil. Two. Officer One-Fifteen. Three. Gun. Four. Khalil again. Five. Blood" (*The Hate U Give* 24).

The broken rhythm of this repetition mimics both the shock of trauma and the inability of language to fully contain the violence she has witnessed. Each

repeated word isolates the elements of the event, freezing them in the reader's memory just as they are frozen in Starr's. The effect is to make the act of violence inescapable, ensuring that neither Starr nor the reader can move past it without reckoning with its brutality.

Similarly, in *Dear Martin*, repetition appears in Justyce's letters to Dr. King as a way of expressing both frustration and hopelessness. In one of his reflections, he writes: "No matter what I do, no matter how good I am, no matter how hard I try, I'm always seen as something I'm not" (*Dear Martin* 94).

The repetition of "no matter" here conveys the futility of respectability politics, stressing that merit and moral effort cannot shield Black youth from prejudice. The device captures the exhaustion of constantly being judged against stereotypes, highlighting that racism is not defeated by individual achievement but remains systemic and pervasive. Thomas also uses repetition in her depiction of protest, where chants are repeated to unify voices and demand justice. During the march after Khalil's death, the crowd shouts: "Justice for Khalil! Justice for Khalil!" (*The Hate U Give* 243).

The effect of this repetition is different from the earlier traumatic cadence. Here, the repeated words transform grief into collective power. The language becomes performative, a rallying cry that moves beyond individual memory to collective resistance.

In both novels, therefore, repetition performs a dual function. It memorialises pain by refusing to let traumatic images fade, and it mobilises resistance by amplifying voices in unison. The effect is that readers experience not only the relentless weight of racial discrimination but also the power of language to resist erasure and demand accountability.

### 3.2.2 Epistolary Form

One striking literary device in *Dear Martin* is its epistolary form. Nic Stone integrates letters written by the protagonist, Justyce McAllister, to Dr Martin Luther King Jr. These letters are not meant for delivery but serve as a reflective exercise, allowing Justyce to process the racial injustice and identity struggles he faces. For instance, when he writes, "I know I can't change the way people see me… but how do I not let it change me?", the confessional tone invites the reader into his innermost doubts. The device personalises the narrative, making the novel intimate while simultaneously linking contemporary racial struggles to the enduring legacy of Dr King. The effect here is profound: it situates Justyce's experiences within a larger historical continuum of Black resistance and resilience, giving his personal turmoil a collective weight.

In contrast, *The Hate U Give* does not employ the epistolary form directly, but Angie Thomas experiments with written and spoken testimonies that echo its function. Starr's voice, particularly when she gives her statement to the police and

later testifies in front of the grand jury, reads almost like letters to authority. These moments perform the same role as

Justyce's letters: they document injustice and assert subjectivity in a system determined to erase it. For example, when Starr testifies, "I saw Officer One-Fifteen pull his gun out and I saw him shoot Khalil," the stark directness mimics the epistolary mode's raw truth-telling.

The effect of the epistolary form across the two texts is to foreground voice, vulnerability, and resistance. In *Dear Martin*, the letters embody the private struggle of making sense of racism in America, while in *The Hate U Give*, official testimonies mimic that effect in a public sphere. Together, they highlight how personal and communal narratives challenge systemic injustice and force audiences—readers, juries, or society at large—to confront uncomfortable truths.

### 3.3 **Symbolism and Imagery**

In both *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin*, symbolism and imagery are central to how the authors communicate the weight of racial injustice. Their novels make it clear that everyday objects, words, and spaces can become charged with meaning under the pressure of systemic racism.

In Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, the body of Khalil becomes the first and most enduring image of the novel. Starr recounts his shooting in a plain,

unadorned manner, yet the stark image speaks volumes: “Pow! One. Khalil’s body jerks. Blood splatters from his back. He holds on to the door to keep himself upright. Pow! Two. Khalil gasps. He looks at me, shocked. He falls to the ground” (*The Hate U Give* 23).

The repeated “Pow!” is both onomatopoeic and symbolic. It mimics the gunfire but also becomes a rhythm that underlines how sudden and brutal his erasure is. Khalil is not just a friend Starr has lost; he becomes an emblem of how quickly Black lives can be destroyed by police violence. Later, Starr reflects bitterly: “People like us in situations like this become hashtags, but they rarely get justice” (*The Hate U Give* 59).

Here, the “hashtag” is a modern symbol. Khalil’s life, once rich with personal detail, is now compressed into a trending topic. This image captures how public memory often dehumanises victims, reducing them to slogans.

Another significant image in Thomas’s novel is Garden Heights itself. The neighbourhood, marked by both danger and solidarity, becomes a living symbol. Starr remarks:

“Garden Heights is the kind of place where the liquor store has better hours than the library. And sometimes, I feel like the whole neighbourhood is one big trap” ( *The Hate U Give*101).

The imagery of a "trap" embodies the systemic neglect and cyclical poverty imposed on Black communities. Yet the same streets carry symbols of resilience. The Carter family's home, full of warmth and order, becomes a counter-image to the chaos outside, representing survival and dignity within struggle.

In Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*, symbolism is equally powerful. Early in the novel, Justyce's hoodie becomes more than clothing; it transforms into a racial marker in the eyes of police. When he is slammed against the car, he reflects: "It hits me then. No matter what I do, what I wear, how I speak, I'll never not be seen as a threat" (*Dear Martin* 33).

The hoodie symbolises how Blackness itself is criminalised. It is an ordinary item, yet it carries the weight of stereotypes that strip Justyce of individuality. Later, when news outlets describe the altercation, the hoodie is again mentioned as proof of suspicion, showing how symbols can be twisted to justify violence. The letters to Martin Luther King Jr. also stand as one of Stone's most enduring symbols. Each letter is both a narrative device and a symbolic act of searching for direction. Justyce writes:

"Dear Martin, I'm not sure what to do anymore. I keep thinking about what you'd say if you were here. I keep wondering if you'd call me brave or foolish. All I know is, I'm tired" (*Dear Martin* 42).

The letter is symbolic of an unfulfilled dialogue between past and present. The imagery of writing to a civil rights leader underscores Justyce's need for guidance in a world where racism still dominates. The ink on paper symbolises his effort to carve clarity amid chaos. Symbols in both novels often overlap. Starr's silence, shown when she withholds the truth, is symbolised by physical restraint: "I've held it in for weeks. Every time it rises in my throat, I swallow it back down. If I don't talk about it, it didn't happen, right?" (*The Hate U Give* 169).

This silence is a symbol of trauma, but also of the danger of speaking truth to power. Similarly, in *Dear Martin*, shattered glass after violent moments becomes an image of broken security:

"There's glass everywhere. Shards across the seat, the floor, stuck in my hair. My reflection in the window is jagged, unrecognisable" (*Dear Martin* 136).

The fragmented reflection symbolises Justyce's fractured sense of self after encountering brutality.

Through such symbols, Thomas and Stone translate systemic racism into tangible, visible forms. Hashtags, hoodies, silence, letters, neighbourhoods, and glass—all ordinary things—become heavy with meaning. They remind readers that racism does not only live in law or politics but in the daily symbols that define who is seen, who is silenced, and who survives.

### 3.4 Dialogue and Slang as Cultural Markers

Dialogue and slang in both *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* do more than make characters sound authentic. They are cultural markers that reveal identity, draw boundaries between groups, and highlight how language itself can be weaponised or reclaimed.

In *The Hate U Give*, Starr constantly navigates two linguistic worlds: the language of Garden Heights and the language of Williamson Prep. She admits: "I never know which Starr I'm gonna be. Williamson Starr doesn't use slang—if a rapper would say it, she doesn't say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her 'hood.' Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she's the 'angry black girl'" (*The Hate U Give* 71).

This passage illustrates how code-switching operates as survival. The same words can empower her in one space and stigmatise her in another. Starr's speech becomes a symbol of the tension between assimilation and authenticity. Her double life is not just personal—it embodies the wider struggle of Black individuals moving through spaces where their culture is simultaneously appropriated and condemned.

Khalil's speech also functions as a cultural marker, especially in his conversation about Thug Life:

'Pac said Thug Life stood for 'The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody.' You give kids the stank eye, call them hood rats and project trash, and that's all they know. One day they're gonna give you that same hate back, and what society give us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out" (*The Hate U Give* 17).

The slang here—"stank eye," "hood rats," "wild out"—is not meaningless filler but compressed cultural wisdom. Khalil's words carry the rhythm and truth of a community's lived experience, showing how language from the margins explains systemic injustice in terms mainstream discourse avoids.

In *Dear Martin*, Nic Stone shows how dialogue and slang expose the sharp edges of racial tension. During a heated exchange, Justyce's friend Manny challenges his father's assimilationist stance: "'You don't get it, Dad. You don't walk around with people clutching their purses when you pass. You don't get followed in stores. You don't get pulled over for no reason. We do. And I'm tired of pretending it's not happening'" (*Dear Martin* 84).

Though less slang-heavy, the dialogue rings with urgency. Manny's blunt rhythm—short clauses piled one after the other—mirrors the exhaustion of

constant racial surveillance. This stripped-down style is its own cultural marker, showing frustration that refuses polish or disguise.

Stone also uses the language of Justyce's white classmates to reveal racism embedded in casual slang. When Jared insists America is colour-blind, he mocks: "'Bruh, you're overreacting. We don't live in the sixties anymore. Racism is over, man. Nobody's holding you down but you'" (*Dear Martin* 45).

The word "bruh," borrowed from Black vernacular, is telling here. Jared adopts it as if to seem familiar and "cool," but his use of it alongside dismissal of racism underscores how appropriation strips language of its depth and history. The slang becomes hollow, emptied of solidarity.

The novel also explores how Justyce's own voice shifts depending on audience. In one of his letters to King, he reflects: "Dear Martin, sometimes I feel like there are two versions of me. One who talks like everyone at school. One who talks like everyone at home. I wonder if I'll ever get to be just one person" (*Dear Martin 63*).This confession mirrors Starr's struggle in Thomas's novel. Both characters are caught between dialects, with dialogue becoming a mirror of fractured identity.

Together, Thomas and Stone show that language is never neutral. The slang of Garden Heights carries defiance and cultural memory. The blunt, clipped speech

of Stone's characters communicates the weight of exhaustion. The appropriated slang of white peers exposes hypocrisy. Dialogue itself becomes a battlefield where identity, power, and belonging are contested.

### 3.5 *Narrative Voice and Perspective*

The narrative voice in *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* is central to how the stories communicate the realities of racism and systemic injustice. Both novels use first-person narration, but each in distinct ways that highlight personal experience while raising broader social questions.

In *The Hate U Give*, Starr's voice drives the novel. Her perspective gives readers direct access to the pain, fear, and contradictions of living in two different worlds. She reflects early on about her divided identity: "I never know what version of Starr people expect me to be. At Williamson, I'm quiet, proper, and careful not to let the hood come out. But at home in Garden Heights, I'm me, all the way. Two worlds, two versions of myself" (*The Hate U Give* 71).

Here, the narrative voice is intimate, conversational, and self-aware. Starr does not only narrate events—she interprets them, struggles with them, and questions herself through them. This personal voice allows readers to experience the instability of racial identity as lived reality.

Thomas also uses Starr's narration to confront readers directly with the brutality of racism. When Khalil is shot, Starr describes every detail with devastating clarity: "One. Khalil's body jerks. Two. He groans. Three. He gasps. The officer shouts for him to stay still. Four. Khalil doesn't move. Five. Blood pools around him. Six. Khalil is gone" *(The Hate U Give* 22). The clipped rhythm here is not neutral—it is Starr's perspective forcing the reader to feel the violence in real time. The narrative voice carries both trauma and testimony, turning the novel into a record of injustice.

In *Dear Martin*, the narrative perspective shifts between third-person narration and Justyce's private letters to Martin Luther King Jr. This creates a dual voice: one that shows his outward experiences and one that reveals his inner struggle. In his letters, Justyce uses a reflective and searching voice: "Dear Martin, I keep asking myself what you would do in my shoes. How would you respond if the world treated you like a criminal before you ever did anything wrong? I'm trying to stay calm, but some days it feels impossible" (*Dear Martin* 35). This confessional style resembles a journal, creating intimacy with the reader. It exposes vulnerability and doubt, giving the narrative a raw honesty. Unlike Starr, who speaks in one consistent first-person voice, Justyce alternates between an external perspective and his internal voice, which highlights the tension between how he appears to others and how he truly feels.

The third-person narration in *Dear Martin* also carries weight. It often describes Justyce from the outside, reflecting the way society sees him. After being handcuffed without cause, the narrator observes:

"To the officer, he wasn't a top student at Braselton Prep. He wasn't debate captain or a kid with an Ivy League future. He was just a Black boy in handcuffs, another suspect who fit the description" ( *Dear Martin* 4).

Here, the narrative voice mirrors the dehumanising perspective of society. Unlike Starr's self-controlled narration, Justyce's story is partly told by an external voice that strips him of individuality, echoing how racism denies people their humanity.

Comparing both, Thomas and Stone use voice to shape empathy. Starr's first-person account places the reader directly inside her divided life, while Justyce's alternating voices—letters and narration—create a layered portrait of inner conflict and external perception. Together, they demonstrate how perspective itself is political: who gets to speak, and how they are seen, determines the story that is told.

### 3.6 Use of Symbolism and Imagery

Both *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* rely strongly on symbolism and imagery to deepen their critique of racism and social injustice. The authors use objects,

names, and repeated images to carry meaning beyond the immediate narrative, shaping how readers understand racial trauma.

In *The Hate U Give*, the most powerful symbol is Khalil's hairbrush, which is mistaken by the officer for a gun. Starr reflects: "He pulled out a hairbrush. That's all it was. A brush. And he died because of it. Something so ordinary. Something every Black boy has in his car, his locker, his pocket. But to them, it was a weapon" (*The Hate U Give 26*).

The hairbrush becomes an image of the fatal misinterpretations that cost Black lives. Its ordinariness makes its symbolism even more devastating: it represents how Blackness itself is criminalised, where any everyday object can be read as dangerous.

Another strong symbol in the novel is the title itself, drawn from Tupac's phrase "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody" (THUG LIFE). Starr explains its meaning: "What society gives us as youth, comes back to bite them when we act out what they put in us. Khalil's death wasn't just about him. It was about everything that's been poured into us, and what spills out when we've had enough" (*The Hate U Give* 168).

Here, the title becomes more than a slogan—it is imagery of a cycle of oppression, where hate breeds violence that returns to the very society that created it. Through this, Thomas uses metaphor to expand the novel's scope from Khalil's individual story to a generational condition.

In *Dear Martin*, one of the most potent images is Justyce's letters to Martin Luther King Jr. The letters themselves act as symbolic objects. They are not only writing exercises but also a bridge across time, connecting Justyce's struggle with King's legacy: "I'm writing to you because I don't know who else to talk to. People around me don't get it. Even my friends. But I know you would understand. You fought battles like mine, only now I feel like things haven't changed as much as they should have" ( *Dear Martin 13*).

The letters symbolise the unbroken line of racial struggle, suggesting that even decades after King's civil rights leadership, young Black men are still fighting the same battles.

Stone also uses imagery in his portrayal of violence. After Manny's death, Justyce remembers it vividly: "There was blood everywhere. It sprayed the dashboard,

stained my shirt, and I couldn't get the sound of the gunshot out of my head. It felt like the world stopped spinning right there in that car" (*Dear Martin* 132).

The imagery here is visceral and haunting, forcing readers to see the scene as Justyce saw it. Just as Thomas uses Khalil's death to anchor the novel's symbolic world, Stone uses Manny's death as a symbolic rupture—an image that makes racism unavoidable, undeniable, and unforgettable.

Comparing both texts, the symbolic elements function similarly: everyday items (a hairbrush, a letter) become charged with extraordinary weight, showing how racism reshapes the ordinary into the tragic. The imagery of spilled blood, broken bodies, and interrupted lives is not only descriptive but rhetorical—it appeals to the reader's emotions, demanding both recognition and response.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# THE EFFECT OF RACISM IN THE SOCIETY

## 4.0 Introduction

Racism does not only manifest in acts of violence or discrimination, it leaves deep psychological scars, fractures communities, and ultimately awakens a

powerful demand for justice. This chapter explores the multifaceted effects of racism as depicted in Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*.It examines how black youths like Starr and Justyce experience profound psychological trauma and emotional distress in the aftermath of racism, forced to navigate grief, fear, and identity in a society that often devalues their lives. It also analyzes the resulting uprising and community division, as public outrage over injustice leads to protests, riots, and tensions within families, schools, and neighborhoods. Finally, the chapter highlights the awakening of activism and political consciousness, showing how personal pain transforms into public resistance, as young protagonists find their voices and rise to challenge systemic oppression. Together, these effects reveal that racism is not an isolated incident, but a cycle, one that harms, divides, and, ultimately, inspires a fight for change.

### 4.1 Psychological Trauma and Emotional Distress in Black Youths

Psychological trauma refers to the emotional and mental response to a deeply distressing or life-threatening event, such as violence, loss, or systemic oppression. When this trauma occurs within a context of racial injustice, it can lead to long-term emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For black youths in America, this trauma is often rooted in experiences of racism, police brutality,

community violence, and the constant fear of being targeted simply because of their race.

In *The Hate U Give*, Starr Carter, the novel's protagonist, embodies this reality. After witnessing the police shooting of her best friend, Khalil, she experiences a range of psychological effects that reflect the deep emotional toll racism takes on young black lives.

One of the most visible signs of Starr's psychological trauma is her intrusive flashbacks and recurring nightmares, which blend her past and present traumas into a single, haunting experience. She is forced to relive not only Khalil's death but also the murder of her childhood friend Natasha when she was ten years old.This nightmare is not just a dream,it is a symptom of post-traumatic stress.

"That night, Natasha tries to convince me to follow her to the fire hydrant and Khalil begs me to go for a ride with him."

This highlights Starr's emotional collapse under the weight of multiple losses.She is not just grieving Khalil, but also the death of her friendship with Hailey and the reawakening of her past trauma. The act of screaming into her shirt symbolizes her need to hide her pain, reflecting how she feels she must suppress her emotions in public.

Lastly, witnessing violence, especially at the hands of those meant to protect you, leaves deep psychological wounds. When Starr and her brother Seven approached a police roadblock, they began to panic, not because they did anything wrong but because of trauma. Seeing police on the road at this moment triggers a severe emotional and physical response, revealing the deep psychological wounds they each carry.

In *Dear Martin,* Nic Stone uses Justyce McAllister as a poignant case study of the psychological trauma and emotional distress Black youths often endure due to systemic racism and racial profiling.

One key instance occurs after Justyce is violently arrested despite doing nothing wrong—trying to help his intoxicated ex-girlfriend, Melo. The unjust arrest leaves him shaken, confused, and hyper-aware of how his Blackness makes him a target. He writes in his first letter to Dr. King: "How do you make it stop?" (*Dear Martin* 12) —highlighting his emotional turmoil and search for coping mechanisms in the face of dehumanization.

The psychological trauma and emotional distress experienced by black youths in *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* are not isolated reactions to single events, all of these illustrate that psychological trauma and emotional distress in black youths are not limited to the moment of violence, but they are ongoing, systemic, and deeply personal. Starr Carter is haunted by flashbacks, nightmares,

and overwhelming grief after witnessing the police killing of her friend Khalil. Her trauma is compounded by hypervigilance, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While Justyce McAllister and the other character's experiences in the novel shows how a single act of police brutality can destroy the state of mind of a person, causing severe emotional distress and outburst.

**4.2 Uprising and Community Division**

In literature, an uprising is often depicted as a collective response to systemic oppression or a traumatic event that acts as a catalyst for change. It's a moment when a community, pushed to its breaking point, rises up to demand justice and challenge the status quo. These narratives explore the motivations behind such movements, from righteous anger and grief to the deep-seated desire for equality. An uprising is not just about direct action, but also about the shift in power dynamics, the questioning of authority, and the forging of a collective identity in opposition to an unjust system. However, a critical component of these narratives is the community division that often accompanies an uprising.

In Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*, the uprising following the police killing of Khalil Harris is not a singular, spontaneous explosion, but a complex, evolving response to systemic injustice, catalyzed by a specific act of violence. It is portrayed as both a necessary outpouring of communal grief and rage, and a deeply fraught process that exposes internal fractures within the black community

and the wider society. The novel meticulously charts the progression of this uprising, from the immediate, raw reaction to Khalil's death to the organized, yet volatile, protests that follow the grand jury's decision not to indict Officer Brian Cruise.

The initial spark of the uprising is the murder itself, an event that shatters the protagonist Starr Carter's world and serves as the inciting incident for the community's collective trauma. The immediate aftermath is characterized by shock and disbelief, but also by a simmering, familiar anger. When news of Khalil's death spreads, the community's response is swift. By the time of Khalil's funeral, activist April Ofrah is already mobilizing, announcing to the congregation, "We won't give up until Khalil receives justice. I ask you to join us and Khalil's family after the service for a peaceful march to the cemetery. Our route happens to pass the police station. Khalil was silenced, but let's join together and make our voices heard for him" (*The Hate U Give* 91). This marks the transition from private mourning to public, collective action. The march is the first organized expression of the uprising, a demand for accountability channeled through a sanctioned, albeit powerful, public demonstration. However, the novel is clear that peaceful protest, while noble, is often insufficient against entrenched power structures. The uprising truly ignites and escalates when the system fails to deliver justice.

The uprising is portrayed as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is a powerful, undeniable force that forces the issue into the national spotlight and makes the community's pain impossible to ignore. It is an expression of Thug Life, as defined by Tupac and explained by Maverick: "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody." The systemic neglect and violence inflicted upon the youth of Garden Heights (the "little infants") is now being returned to the system in the form of societal disruption (it "Fucks Everybody"). The uprising is the community saying, "We will not be silent. We will not be erased." This is embodied in Starr's own transformation. Initially paralyzed by fear and the desire to protect her dual identity, she is galvanized by the grand jury's decision. She joins the protests on Carnation Street, the very site of Khalil's murder, and is handed a bullhorn by April Ofrah. Her voice, once silenced, becomes a weapon, "My name is Starr. I'm the one who saw what happened to Khalil. And it wasn't right. We weren't doing anything wrong. Not only did
Officer Cruise assume we were up to no good, he assumed we were criminals. Well, Officer Cruise is the criminal." (*The Hate U Give* 276). This is the pinnacle of Starr's personal uprising and a catalyst for further chaos.

In Nic Stone's *Dear Martin,* the police shooting of Manny triggers an uprising—protests and outrage in the community which also causes division among people who see the event very differently. After Manny's death, students at Braselton Prep (Justyce's school) react in opposite ways:

- Some, like Jared, argue the officer "feared for his life" and blame Manny for playing loud rap music and "acting suspicious" (*Dear Martin 149-150*). This reflects how racial bias can justify violence in some people's eyes.

Others, especially Black students and allies, protest and demand justice. Justyce joins a peaceful march, but tension rises when some protests turn heated—showing how trauma can push communities toward action, but also expose deep divides.

At the town hall (*Dear Martin* 182–185), arguments erupt: white parents defend the system, while Black families speak raw truth about fear and loss. Justyce realizes: *"People don't want to fix the system. They just want to pretend it's not broken." So the uprising sparks necessary attention—but also highlights how racism splits communities, even when the truth is right in front of them.

**4.3 The Awakening of Activism and Political Consciousness**

In Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's Dear *Martin*, activism is not born in the halls of power or the strategy rooms of seasoned organizers, but in the trembling hands, sleepless nights, and shattered illusions of teenagers forced to confront the brutal machinery of systemic injustice. The awakening of political consciousness in these novels is neither swift nor glamorous; it is a slow, painful, and deeply personal unraveling, a dawning horror

that the world as they knew it was built on lies, and a subsequent, courageous decision to speak those truths aloud, even when silence feels safer.

In Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*, Starr is quiet. She tries to stay out of trouble. She lives two lives, one in her mostly black neighborhood, Garden Heights, and one at her mostly white private school, Williamson Prep. She doesn't talk about what happens in Garden Heights at school, and she doesn't bring her school friends into her neighborhood life. She thinks this is how to stay safe. But after Khalil is killed in front of her, she can't stay quiet anymore, even though she wants to.Right after the shooting, Starr says: "I always hear people say it's not about race. But if Thug Life means what society gives us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out, then what society gave us was messed up, and it's not our fault." This is one of the first moments where Starr starts to think politically. She's not just sad or angry, she's starting to see that Khalil's death is not just about one bad cop. It's about a whole system that treats black kids like criminals before they even do anything wrong. She connects what happened to Khalil to something bigger, to the way society treats young black people.

Starr's activism doesn't start with a big speech or a protest. It starts small. She talks to reporters. She tells the truth about Khalil, that he was a kid, not a thug. She repeated, "He was a kid. He was a kid. He was a kid." She repeats this because she knows people are trying to make Khalil look bad to make his killing

seem okay. By saying “he was a kid,” she’s fighting back with her words. She’s refusing to let them turn Khalil into a criminal after he’s dead. This is activism, using her voice to change how people see the truth. Her biggest moment comes at the climax of things,she climbs on top of a police car, takes a bullhorn, and speaks to the crowd and the police, “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... Everybody wants to talk about how Khalil died. But this isn’t about how Khalil died. It’s about the fact that he lived. His life mattered. Khalil lived!” (*The Hate U Give* 276-277). This is the moment when Starr’s political consciousness and her activism become one.

In Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin,* Justyce’s journey shows how trauma and injustice can awaken activism and political consciousness especially in young Black people. At first, Justyce tries to be “perfect”: get good grades, speak properly, follow rules—believing that if he’s “good enough,” racism won’t touch him. But after his wrongful arrest (*Dear Martin 12)* and especially after Manny’s death (*Dear Martin 146*), he begins to question that belief.

A key moment comes when he stops writing letters only to Dr. King and instead starts speaking up for himself. At the school debate, he challenges Jared’s biased views on race and policing (*Dear Martin* 76–78), showing he’s no longer staying

quiet to keep others comfortable. "I'm done trying to be what people want me to be… I'm gonna speak up—even if my voice shakes." (*Dear Martin 191-192)*

This marks his full awakening: he moves from confusion and silence to owning his voice, understanding systemic injustice, and choosing action. His activism isn't loud or violent—it's clear, thoughtful, and rooted in truth.

In Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin,* activism and political consciousness are shown as deeply personal, often painful journeys that begin with a single moment of injustice that grow into a lifelong commitment to speaking truth and demanding change. In the end, both novels leave us with the same message: change doesn't start with a march or a hashtag. It starts with a choice, the choice to see, to feel, to speak, and to act. And once you make that choice, you can't go back. You become part of something bigger than yourself. You become part of the movement. And that, both books argue, is where real power begins.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# SUMMARY, FINDING, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

## 5.1 Summary

This study set out to examine how Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* dramatise racial injustice and reveal the failures of the American justice system. In both texts, we saw that race is not treated as a neutral category but as a marker that shapes how young Black characters are perceived, judged, and often condemned before they even speak. Starr Carter's painful recollection of Khalil's death, where a routine stop ends in a fatal shooting, exemplifies how easily Black life can be devalued under the gaze of law enforcement. Justyce McAllister's wrongful arrest for simply helping a friend, and his later encounter with racial profiling, echoes the same point: innocence is not enough protection when skin colour itself is criminalised.

In Chapter Two, attention was given to the justice system's inability to offer accountability. Starr's moment in court, where her truth is met with disbelief and Khalil is remembered not as a boy but as a stereotype, shows that the law often works against rather than for Black communities. Likewise, Justyce's experiences reflect the same systemic silencing. His frustration is not only with the white police officer who profiled him but with the wider society that justifies such

treatment. Both texts insist that the failure of the justice system is not an accident but a pattern, woven into the structures of power.

The analysis also highlighted grief and resistance as central themes. Starr's family and community are forced to balance mourning with the need to protest, while Justyce channels his anger into writing letters to Martin Luther King Jr. These letters are not merely private reflections but literary devices that keep alive a conversation across generations, questioning whether King's dream has truly been realised.

In Chapter Three, language and literary devices were explored. Thomas and Stone do not only narrate events; they craft rhetorical strategies to immerse readers in the realities of their characters. Thomas uses code-switching to capture Starr's dual existence between her Black neighbourhood and her predominantly white school.

Her invocation of Tupac's phrase, "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody," is a haunting reminder that racial injustice harms not only its immediate victims but society as a whole. Stone, on the other hand, builds the structure of *Dear Martin* around letters. Justyce's direct address to Martin Luther King Jr. becomes a symbol of dialogue between past and present, emphasising the unfinished work of civil rights.

By weaving together personal narrative, community struggle, and symbolic language, both writers create texts that are as politically urgent as they are emotionally powerful.

**5.2 Findings**

The findings of this study confirm that *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* are not simply novels written for young adults; they are urgent social commentaries that expose the mechanics of racial injustice and offer new ways of imagining resistance. Thomas and Stone present fiction that is deeply tethered to reality. Their characters are fictional, but their struggles mirror those faced by real young Black men and women whose stories often end up as headlines or, worse still, as silences lost to history.

One of the central lessons that emerges from both novels is that racism is systemic. It is not limited to the obvious moment of a police officer pulling the trigger or placing a Black boy in handcuffs. It is woven into schools that demand silence from Black students, media outlets that criminalise victims, and courts that dismiss Black voices as unreliable. By showing these layers, Thomas and Stone expose injustice in its fullness and remind us that reform requires more than cosmetic changes it demands a restructuring of how society views and values Black lives.

Another important insight is the role of voice and testimony. Starr's courage in speaking out, despite threats and fear, shows that silence protects only the oppressor. Justyce's insistence on writing letters, even when he is ignored, proves that narrative is a form of resistance. In both cases, literature itself becomes an act of justice. The reader is not a passive consumer but a witness, called to recognise the humanity of characters and, by extension, of real individuals facing the same struggles.

The novels also challenge the future. By addressing younger audiences directly, Thomas and Stone remind us that the fight against injustice is generational. The responsibility does not belong only to those in positions of power but also to readers, students, and communities who must decide how they will confront prejudice when it arises in their own lives.

**5.3 Recommendations**

Further Literary Exploration:

Analyze similar themes in other contemporary novels like _All American Boys_ by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, focusing on police brutality and activism.

Examine the portrayal of Black youth resilience in books like _Ghost Boys_ by Jewell Parker Rhodes.

Social and Educational Impact:

Encourage schools and communities to use these novels as tools for sparking discussions on racial injustice, empathy, and allyship.

Suggest partnerships with local organizations promoting racial equality to extend the conversation beyond literature.

Policy and Awareness:

Advocate for more inclusive curricula that highlight diverse voices and experiences, addressing systemic racism and social justice issues. Support initiatives that promote awareness of racial profiling and encourage youth engagement in activism.

Based on the exploration of racism in _The Hate U Give_ and _Dear Martin_, it is recommended that:

1. Educators integrate these novels into curricula to foster critical discussions on racial justice.

2. Readers engage in community dialogues to amplify the books' messages of activism and empathy.

3. Further studies examine the impact of young adult literature on perceptions of systemic racism in Nigeria and globally.

**5.4 Conclusion**,

These novels assert that literature is not a retreat from reality but a confrontation with it. They take what might otherwise remain statistics or passing news stories and give them flesh, voice, and urgency. They force us to reckon with uncomfortable truths: that justice remains incomplete, that racism adapts and persists, and that silence is complicity. Yet, at the same time, they offer hope. Starr's voice and Justyce's letters affirm that speaking out matters, that protest matters, and that change—while slow—remains possible.

Ultimately, *The Hate U Give* and *Dear Martin* should be read not only as narratives but as calls to conscience. They are reminders that the responsibility of dismantling racial injustice rests with all of us, and that the question is not whether we have heard these stories, but whether we are willing to act upon them.

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