



Activism as Social Emancipation in Angie Thomas *The Hate U Give*

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Abstract

The paper examines how activism serves as a conduit for social emancipation within the African American community in the novel *The Hate U Give*. The narrative centers on Starr Carter, a 16-year-old who witnesses the tragic police shooting of her friend, Khalil. This pivotal event propels Starr into the realm of activism, compelling her to confront systemic racism and societal injustices. The novel also delves into the complexities of navigating dual identities. Starr's experiences at her predominantly white private school contrast sharply with her life in Garden Heights. The paper explores Starr's activism becomes a unifying force, enabling her to reconcile these facets of her identity and advocate effectively for her community's liberation. *The Hate U Give* portrays activism as a catalyst for social emancipation, emphasizing the importance of courage, community solidarity, and the relentless pursuit of justice in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Activism, Injustices, Identities, Justice, Solidarity.

Angie Thomas born on September 20, 1988, Jackson, Mississippi, U.S is an American writer. His first young-adult novel, *The Hate U Give* (2017), debuted at number one on The New York Times bestseller list, launching her to international fame. In the novel, Thomas tackles volatile and timely subjects as racism, privilege, and police brutality. Thomas grew up in an economically depressed African American neighborhood in Jackson, Mississippi. At an early age she was exposed to drug dealing and gun violence and found refuge in books. As a teenager Thomas performed as a rapper and appeared in *Right On*, a teen magazine devoted to African American celebrities. She went on to study creative writing at Belhaven University in Jackson, where she received a bachelor of fine arts degree in 2011. Thomas initial intention was to write fantasy and middle grade novels.

The Hate U Give is a young adult fiction by Angie Thomas. It is Thomas's debut

novel, expanded from a short story she wrote in college in reaction to the police shooting of Oscar Grant. The story is narrated by Starr Carter, a 16-year-old African-American girl from a poor neighborhood who attends an elite private school in a predominantly white, affluent part of the city. Starr becomes entangled in a national news story after she witnesses a white police officer shoot and kill her childhood friend, Khalil. She speaks up about the shooting in increasingly public ways, and social tensions culminate in a riot after a grand jury decides not to indict the police officer for the shooting.

Activism shape political outcomes by encouraging everyday citizens, rather than political insiders, to take action that brings public attention to specific issues or demands. This is often achieved by creating media coverage through events such as protests, strikes, or confrontations. Activism typically operates in a cycle where early actions attract attention and participation, leading to further activism and increased awareness. While some activism is strategically organized by established groups, other movements arise spontaneously when individuals unite to protest a common issue, sparking broader waves of action.

In the novel, activism emerges as a potent tool for social emancipation, embodying the novel's central theme of voicing opposition to injustice. Starr Carter, the main character, must balance her two worlds Garden Heights, her neighbourhood and her White prep school. She eventually becomes a force for change after seeing her friend Khalil shot by the police. Starr's journey demonstrates the effectiveness of activism as a strategy for fighting systematic oppression and regaining agency. Fear and pressure from different communities make Starr hesitant to speak up at first, but activism gives her potency in the end. With courage, she takes to her platform to confront the racism that permeates her society and to demand justice for Khalil.

The novel illustrates how activism can inspire collective action and solidarity. Starr's involvement in protests, media interviews, and community organizing inspires others to take part the fight against police aggression and racial discrimination. Through her activism, she sparks conversations about privilege, ally ship, and the pertinence of amplifying marginalized voices. Furthermore, the novel highlights how societal and



personal liberation are intertwined. Starr experiences personal growth as she battles for justice on the outside, facing her own prejudices and finding the courage to proudly embrace who she is. Essentially, Thomas presents activism as a vehicle for social change and personal empowerment in addition to a way to confront injustice. The novel emphasizes the ongoing importance of activism in the quest for righteousness and equality for all through Starr's journey.

Emancipation and empowerment strategies are woven throughout the narrative in the novel, illustrating the various ways characters seek liberation from oppressive systems and find strength in their identities. One prominent strategy for emancipation is through education and awareness. Starr, the protagonist, maneuvers between a community predominantly inhabited by Black residents and her white prep school. Through her experiences in both environments, she becomes increasingly aware of the discrimination and systemic racism that permeate society. This is evident in the novel "I should be used to my two worlds colliding, but I never know which Starr I should be. I can use some slang, but not too much slang, some attitude, but not too much attitude, so I'm not a "sassy black girl." I have to watch what I say and how I say it, but I can't sound "white" (316). This awareness empowers her to challenge stereotypes, confront bias, and educate others about the realities of being Black in America.

Empowerment is the cultivation of community and solidarity. Starr finds support and strength within her family, particularly her parents and siblings. They encourage her to use her voice to oppose discrimination. The whole family's support is highly reflective when Starr was going to "Grand Jury Room". Her mother is really supportive and her words motivate Starr as well as the readers. After receiving affectionate gestures and words of pride from her mother, Starr expresses disdain for the word brave. Despite her disapproval, her mother insists on her bravery and shares a look that conveys a deep understanding and warmth, which comforts her on a profound level:

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. She leans up slightly on her tiptoes and kisses my forehead as if that makes it true. For me it

kinda does. Daddy wraps his arms around both of us. “You got this, baby girl.” (293-94)

These lines show their bonding and support they give to Starr. Her half-brother Seven also encourages her to speak up. Expressing frustration, he declares his readiness to join whatever action Starr chooses, even suggesting a potentially destructive course of action. Additionally, she connects with activists and organizers who share her commitment to fighting for change. Together, they form a supportive network that amplifies their voices and fosters collective action.

Self-expression and authenticity emerge as crucial tools for emancipation and empowerment in the novel. Starr wrestles with the expectation to adhere to societal norms and expectations and code-switch between her two worlds. However, as she grows more confident in her identity and values, she learns to embrace her authentic self and speak her truth unapologetically. This journey towards self-acceptance empowers her to advocate for justice and demand accountability from those in power. Following the incident where Khalil was shot by a cop, Starr becomes a vocal advocate for justice. She participates in protests, speaks to the media, and engages in community organizing efforts. Through her activism, Starr not only seeks justice for Khalil but also empowers her and others to challenge the systemic injustices that perpetuate violence and discrimination.

The novel portrays a range of emancipation and empowerment strategies, including education, community building, self-expression, and activism. Through the experiences of the characters, the novel draws attention to the relevance of resilience, solidarity, and agency in the pursuit of liberation and social change. Activism plays a transformative role in Starr’s life, guiding her journey from silence to empowerment. Initially, Starr grapples with the consequences of speaking out about Khalil’s tragedy. Fearful of retaliation and torn between her Black neighbourhood, Garden Heights, and her white prep school, Williamson, Starr struggles to search for her voice amidst societal pressures and expectations.

The narrative develops, activism emerges as a guiding force, empowering Starr to confront injustice and assert her identity. Emboldened by her campaigner father, Maverick,

and inspired by the memories of Khalil, Starr begins to recognize the power of her voice as a means for change “We want freedom. We want the power to determine the destiny of our black and oppressed communities. Point seven. We want an immediate end to police brutality . . . other people of color, and oppressed people.” (283)

Starr channels her frustration and sorrow into action, participating in protests, advocating for justice, and speaking out against police brutality. Ms. O’frah is the activist she came across with, she is also her personal attorney who helped her to emerge from her shell. She and other activists conduct a protest against the injustice that Khalil faced. Starr, Seven, Chris and DeVante happen to see this and they joined the protest. In the protest, O’frah leads a chant affirming that a hairbrush cannot be mistaken for a gun, which is joined by others. Each time Starr mutters the chant she reminds herself “Khalil drops it into the side of the door . . . He opens the door to ask if I’m okay. Then pow-pow” (24). She screams as loudly as she can, raising her fist in the air. Tears were streaming down her face.

Starr finds solidarity and community support, both within Garden Heights and beyond. She forges connections with fellow activists, allies, and supporters who amplify her message and stand by her side for confronting against systemic racism. These relationships provide Starr with strength, encouragement, and a feeling of being accepted and included, reinforcing her commitment to the cause. Activism serves as a spark for self-improvement and self-discovery for Starr. As she negotiates the complexities of her dual identity and confronts her own biases, Starr masters to accept her authenticity and assert herself unapologetically.

She summons the bravery to challenge societal norms and expectations, refusing to be silenced or marginalized. She speaks “Everybody wants to talk about how Khalil died,”

I say. “But this isn’t about how Khalil died. It’s about the fact that he lived” (365). She asserted passionately that Khalil remained living and his life was also valuable. Through this act she only wants others to realise that Khalil’s life mattered.

Jay Shelat highlights, “Thomas confronts the racist institutions that determine

color lines and implements specifically black cultural symbols and capital to serve as foils to the racist ideologies and hierarchies at the heart of Starr's community" (70). Her coming-of-age journey as a young African-American is filtered through traditional and new media, which affect her self-discovery throughout the story. Indeed, among the other social networks, Twitter helps Starr to have a more consistent awareness of her friend hypocrisy and the several racist incidents happening in her country. Instead, the news affects her privacy and exposes Starr's past. In the first part of the novel, the media are an obstacle in her attempt to live a normal life. They contribute to the aforementioned circulation of hatred, from which Starr must find a way to escape.

Thomas represents the protagonist's response to the difficulties created by internal and societal turmoil's, and consequently, creates an outlook of the teenagers problems in overcoming violent systems. Discussing how young adult fiction, like *The Hate U Give*, explores racism and discrimination with an unconventional lens, Zara Rix explains that "the female narrators push the stories toward nuanced depictions of multiple types of violence, both systemic and personal" (53).

Activism becomes integral to Starr's identity and purpose, shaping her beliefs, values, and actions. It empowers her to liberate from the enclosures of silence and complacency, inspiring her to advocate for justice, equality, and change in her neighbourhood and beyond. Through her journey, Starr embodies the influence activism to create transformation in challenging oppression and fostering social emancipation. She finally reveals her face in front of everybody saying she is the witness.

Starr, speaking into a bullhorn, identifies herself as the witness to Khalil's death and declares that it was unjust. She receives affirmation from the people by saying 'yeahs' and 'amens' (364). Starr proclaims that they weren't doing anything wrong and criticizes Officer Cruise for assuming they were criminals, stating that he is the one acting unlawfully. This shows that she is no more afraid to speak up the truth and she is no more hiding herself from the global perspective.

Starr Carter grapples with a silence enforced by the weight of societal expectations and fear. Growing up in the Black clan of Garden Heights, she learns early

on the consequences of using voice to fight injustice. This silence is not only imposed externally by the threat of retaliation but also internally, as Starr struggles with reconciling her dual identity. As a result, she often feels pressured to hide aspects of herself, including her experiences in her neighbourhood, from her peers at Williamson Preparatory, where Starr is one among the few Black students.

Starr's transformation from passivity to voicing comes with the tragic death of her childhood pal Khalil by a white cop. Initially paralyzed by shock and fear, Starr wrests with the decision to remain silent or to speak out about what she witnessed. Kenya was mad at her for being silent after the incident because the white world is picturing Khalil as a thug and drug dealer. Kenya urges Starr to opine on television about the reality of the events that happened at the night Khalil was killed. She criticizes the media for portraying Khalil in an unfavourable manner, characterizing him as a thug, which Starr knows isn't true. She believes if Khalil were one of Starr's privileged friends, she would be defending him on television.

The injustices surrounding Khalil's death become increasingly apparent, Starr realizes the significance of disrupting her silence. She recognizes that her voice has the power to bring attention on the systemic racism besides abuse of power by police plaguing her community. Starr's journey from silence to voicing is gradual but profound. She starts to discover her voice through small acts of resistance, such as speaking up in discussions at school and challenging her friends' misconceptions about race. When Hailey makes some conflicts by being a racist Starr loses her control.

In a heated exchange, Maya, Hailey, and Starr engage in a conversation about the death of Khalil. Starr expresses disbelief and refuses to accept the idea of simply "getting over" the loss of Khalil. Hailey callously dismisses the gravity of the situation, rationalizing the Khalil's death due to his involvement in illicit activities. This callous remark triggers a visceral reaction from Starr, who retaliates by physically striking Hailey.

The act of violence, though painful, provides a momentary sense of satisfaction for Starr. She is infuriated by Hailey's lack of empathy and understanding. Hailey's stunned



reaction serves as a stark reminder of the impact of her words and the intensity of the emotions involved in the conversation. As she becomes more involved in activism and advocacy for Khalil, Starr's voice grows stronger and more unapologetic. She refuses to be silenced by intimidation or societal expectations, determined to seek justice for her friend and her community.

Starr's transformation exemplifies the strength of standing up in defiance of injustice. Her journey from silence to voicing is not only a personal one but also a political act of resistance against systemic oppression. Through her courage and determination, Starr becomes a guiding light of hope and motivation for others, demonstrating the capacity for transformation of discovering one's voice despite adversity. The novel offers a poignant portrayal of the evolving lives of African American young adults and their assistance to the betterment of American society. Through the lens of protagonist Starr Carter and her peers, the novel delves into the challenges they face, their resilience, and their potential for positive change.

The novel illuminates the challenges of steering dual identities for African American youth like Starr, who straddle two worlds, their predominantly Black neighborhoods and predominantly white institutions. This duality exposes them to different cultural norms, expectations, and systemic inequalities. Starr's journey reflects the struggle to reconcile these disparate experiences while forging her own identity. This can be seen in the given lines below "It's weird though-I'm not as hesitant to dance here as I was at Big D's party . . . White people assume all black people are experts on trends and shit. There's no way in hell I'd try that at a Garden Heights party though. (260)

Despite facing systemic oppression and racial discrimination, the characters in the novel demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency. Through activism and community solidarity, they are questioning the established order and championing equity. Starr's involvement in activism not only empowers her but also inspires others to join the fight against law enforcement violence and racial inequity. Despite being white her boyfriend Chris also participates in the protest along with her. Their collective efforts highlight the



potential of young African Americans to effect positive change and shape the discourse on social issues.

The Hate U Give underscores the importance of education and awareness in empowering African American youth to navigate and challenge systemic injustices. Starr's experiences at her predominantly white prep school expose her to privilege and racism, prompting critical self-reflection and dialogue. The paper offers a hopeful narrative of African American youth actively engaged in shaping a society characterized by equity and greater justice.

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