



Psychological Impact Of Racial Discrimination On The Lead Characters Of *On The Come Up*

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Abstract

Angie Thomas, as a modern novelist, has carved a niche for herself on depicting the reality of racism as an important subject in her novels. More importantly, she has spotlighted the psychological impact of racial discrimination in her novel '*On The Come Up*' (2019). The novel has brought to the fore the subconscious fear that black teenagers live with, and the constant anxiety that hovers on their psyche due to it. The portrayal of teens who think and make decisions, behave and act, with a sense of trepidation, all because of the color of their skin, is very realistically narrated with the incidents that take place with them. Overall, the ongoing on the minds of black teenagers in the novel are related to the perspectives of people who have preconceived notions about the black race. The present paper focuses on taking a psychological take on the minds of the lead characters - Brianna and Malik - that have been shaped due to racist incident and examines their effects.

Keywords: Racism, Psychology, Teenagers, Mind, Behavior

Introduction

Angie Thomas is a young adult American novelist who is best known for two of her books - *The Hate You Give* (2017) and *On The Come Up* (2019), each of which became a #1 New York Times bestseller and were adapted into movies. Angie is the first winner of the Walter Dean Myers Grant program in 2015, awarded by We Need Diverse Books. She has won the ALA's William C. Morris Debut Award, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award (USA), the Waterstones Children's Book Prize (UK), and the Deutscher Jugendliterapreis (Germany) for *The Hate You Give*. Angie has revealed that she considers writing as an embodiment of activism and it's no surprise that *On The Come Up* is inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement. As she herself is a woman of colour, she took a lot of her real life experiences of racial discrimination and depicted them into the life of Brianna. Angie Thomas' attempt to provide insights into the lives of coloured teenagers which include struggles within them and with their circumstances arising out of racism are too intensely narrated to be ignored. Her later book *Concrete Rose* (2021) is a prequel to *The Hate You Give*. In 2020,

Angie released FIND YOUR VOICE: A Guided Journal to Writing Your Truth as a platform to aid would-be writers narrate their tales.

The Psyche of Teenagers and Racism

Through the lead characters of the novel *On The Come Up*, it is apparent that the stigma of racism on teen consciousness is a handicap that prevents the psyche to function with freedom, it's a state where the mind is held captive by fear, and ultimately, breaks its own shackles through resistance that maybe violence or non-violent. The nature of teen psyche is such that it cannot be suppressed for long and it seeks justice for the wrongs that have been done to it. The experiences of racial discrimination and their divergent impact on the minds of teen characters reveal the strengths and weaknesses of their character. According to Ayvazian, Brown, Carlson, et al., "The self-system model describes the erosive effects of internalized racism on individuals—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually." (Ayvazian, Brown, Carlson, et al., n.d.). Moreover, Svetaz, Coyne-Beasley, Trent, et. al., opine that "In internalized racism, self-image is negated (physical), self-concept is limited (mental), self-love is defeated (emotional), and self-esteem is corrupted (spiritual). It manifests itself in a sense of inferiority, by constantly viewing oneself as a victim and denying one's own power to transform a situation or in not taking responsibility for one's role as a perpetrator or or colluder with oppression." (Svetaz, Coyne-Beasley T., Trent M., et. al., n.d). Angie Thomas has very skilfully embedded this internalized racism in Brianna, Sonny, Malik and Curtis with different levels of intensity, be it passive or active. Racial discrimination has many forms and the outcome for the victim is always traumatic and healing is always a challenge as the psyche needs to be conditioned all over again. The primary damage that racial discrimination can do is to shatter the self-confidence of young adults and subconsciously make them believe that the stereotypes regarding them are true. Also, it sows seeds of doubt, mistrust and distrust for the people of their own race. The main characters of *On The Come Up* have experienced racial discrimination at different levels and their reactions to them have been in proportion to their understanding of the prejudice that impacts them. According to Branscombe, Schmitt and Harvey, "Race-based rejection can be experienced through concrete incidents of discrimination." (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). The teenagers of the novel are aware of the issue of racial discrimination against them and have a palpable sense of fear hovering over their mind for who they are. The manifold impacts of racial discrimination on the lead characters of the novel are best viewed with the perspective on their mental and emotional toughness to the racial incidents that they faced and the support they derived from their friends.

Incidentally, Angie Thomas has avoided having any important white character in her novel. By doing so, she has aided the reader to get a true and insightful picture of racial discrimination of black teens – individually and collectively – in a freewheeling manner. That situation enables the young students of colour to have conversations between them that reflect their situations which reek of inequality, bias and injustice.

The Experiences And Thoughts of Brianna

Interestingly, the impact of racial discrimination is not only limited to be a victim, wherein the individual has a psyche which is ready to accept the humiliation knowing well that the treatment meted out to them is an intrinsic part of their life and nothing can be done about it. However, not every racism victim resorts to a defeatist attitude. Brianna is one of them. Significantly, racial discrimination breeds hatred in the psyche of victims which prompts them to react in the same manner (of discrimination) against the people of other races. This act is called reverse racism or reverse discrimination. Collins English dictionary defines reverse racism as - a perceived discrimination against a dominant group or political majority. The following thoughts of Brianna reveal that subconsciously, she too is a practitioner of that ideology.

“Unfortunately to some people in the Garden it’s “nerd shit,” or as some fool at the swap meet said, “white shit.” (p.28).

“There’s always that one white boy who says stupid shit on the name of making friends laugh.” (p.139).

“A dead deer hangs behind them, and the three of them wear camouflage and hold rifles. And yeah, they’re white.” (p.259).

And when Aunt Pooh asks her not to rap stuff “that makes white ladies shit themselves” (p.328), Bri snickers.

Reverse racism may also be practiced out of the feeling of revenge after a victim believes that they are oppressed. Brianna was falsely labelled as a drug dealer for selling candies at school and called a “li’l hoodlum” (p.64) by Long. The impact of that accusation is so severe that Bri actually believes it and thinks “I’m a hoodlum from a bunch of nothing” (p.72) and “Ever since Long called me a ‘hoodlum’, it’s like the word’s branded on my forehead, and I can’t get it off me. Hate that this is bothering me so much.” (p.85). Those self-deprecating statements are a clear sign of a mind that has buckled before the stereotypes it is portrayed with. The mind and body are two different entities, and a mind is neither black or white, but racism is an idea of the mind that involves the body and its colour. Furthermore, it does not come as a surprise that Bri put herself in the role of an oppressed individual and for the sake of justice to herself, became a practitioner of reverse racism.

Additionally, the incident at school makes her live in fear and stress. Woody, Bell, Cruz et. al., observe that, “Stress and trauma following racist encounters is a putative link between exposure to racism and the development of depression. Racism-based traumatic stress theory illustrates that racism causes emotional injury (ie, RST) and thus should be considered by mental health providers as a specific trauma type to center racism as an external and/or situational factor that is outside of an individual’s control and caused by injustice and oppression.” (Woody, Bell, Cruz et. al., 2022). Brianna’s thoughts below are a testimony to the above observation:

“I go in a store in Midtown-the-neighbourhood, and the clerks watch me extra close or follow me around. I know I’m not stealing, but I get scared that they think I’m stealing.” (p.139).

“Sonny, Malik, and I went into a comic shop a few months back, and the clerk followed us around until we left the store. (p.145).

“We go through metal detectors as usual, but it’s hard to focus on anything but the guns o the cops’ waists. Feels like I’m entering a prison instead of my school.” (p.298).

Hence, the effects of racial discrimination produce emotions, feelings and thoughts that damage the psyche very deeply in a multitude of ways. It disrupts the normal thought process, and as a result, the functioning of an individual while dealing with people of other races as doubt, fear and issues of trust linger on in the mind. Teenagers have a long life ahead of them and to live in a state of uncertainty regarding trust is stressful and taxing. The character of Brianna shows resoluteness in times of adversity but her confidence is dealt severe blows through her racist experiences which highlights the intensity of racist behaviour. In her own words – Trust, as many times I’ve been called ‘nigger’ and ‘bitch’ by gamer boys, I can take a hell of a lot.” (p.257). Whether racial discrimination can ever be eradicated is a question that has no easy answers. The only options left for the discriminated against is to either suffer silently or fight against it. Either way, the psyche has to undergo stress, anxiety and fear. Brianna’s rap song ‘*On The Come Up*’ is an outburst against racism, but being a teen and wet behind the ears, her approach is aggressive with a

tit for tat attitude. Brianna’s traumatic experiences of racism made her stronger, and made her the voice of all the oppressed. The nature of the psyche of teens is to react quickly without giving a second thought and Brianna reacted through her music by overcoming her mental and emotional pain which reflects her strong and positive mindset but at the same time, sowed seeds of discrimination in herself.

Malik and his Beliefs

The affects of racial discrimination are so severe that they scar and cripple the mind beyond repair. Bearing that in mind, Angie Thomas has countered it by instilling a positive and strong character in Malik. Throughout the novel, Malik is the only individual who believes that raising a voice against racism is not about talk but about firm action. He is the individual who records the entire incident that took place with Brianna despite being warned not to. His courage that stems from the strong desire for justice reveals his sense of discrimination. His ability to act on what he thinks is right and just speak volumes of his perseverance and tenacity, without fearing for the outcomes. To fathom the impact of racial discrimination on the psyche of Malik, it is essential to understand the importance of attitude of the mind in testing times. The origin of a positive mind lies in its ability to cope with difficult situations in a calm manner and looking for solutions that are effective. The effect of racial discrimination on Malik is a positive one as it brings out his innate qualities of fearlessness and leadership.

It would be appropriate and relevant to consider the statements made by Malik in that context:

“Ever since the protests and riots last year, I’ve been inspired to do something. I can’t just sit around and let things happen anymore.” (p.150).

“We’ve formed an unofficial black and Latinx coalition.” (p.150).

“You have a chance to do something here, Bri. This video gets out and you speak up? It could actually change things at our school.” (p.151).

Studies reviewed by Reich, Zautra, and Davis revealed that:

Positive affect, when present during times of stress, appear maximally effective at strengthening resistance. (Reich, Zautra, and Davis, 2003). That resistance is purely in the mental plane of an individual which includes thoughts, emotions and feelings. This can be understood by noticing the reactions of Malik at various stages of the novel and his initiative of forming a Latinx coalition. Dixon et al., note – “A counterpoint to the prejudice-reduction model of social change is the ‘collective action’ model. (Dixon et al., 2010). It can be ascertained very assuredly that the incident with Brianna awakened a sense of responsibility for social causes in Malik and the knowing for accountability for authority. Any reaction to injustice and oppression is spontaneous and any right thinking individual would not hesitate to protest against it. That is what Malik did. The resistance to injustice did not make him mentally strong – he already was – the incident just brought out to the fore his inner strength.

Malik’s attempt to bring together students of Latin and African origin together against racism and his opposition to violence exhibits a level-headedness that teenagers usually lack due to their impulsiveness. Moreover, the decision of Brianna to remain silent on her racist experience is met with a stiff resistance by Malik and he makes every effort to convince her to raise her voice against racism. Through Malik, the often unnoticed aspect of teen psychology is brought to light - the will to offer resistance to racism through courage and conscience that believes that silence towards racial discrimination is a consent which should never be an option.

Conclusion

On The Come Up is an intensely thought provoking novel that sheds light on the evil of racism and the psychological challenges that teenagers have to go through to lead a normal life of opportunities but is denied. Angie Thomas has depicted the mental and emotional anguish and agony of the lead characters that compels the reader to delve deep into the minds of those characters. The author has very skilfully created the characters of Brianna and Malik who are both victims of racial discrimination but each has a different attitude towards the problem. Furthermore, the novel explicitly reveals the thought processes of the characters through reason. The struggle of both the lead characters is played out in their minds with thoughts and emotions that range from despair to courage and hopelessness to hope. As a result, *On The Come Up* stands out as a novel that

talks about a societal problem of racism that individuals of colour have to suffer since young and their trials and tribulations. Angie Thomas has introduced the readers of young adult fiction to a reality that is often ignored or dismissed. The novel, through its teen characters and their experiences unfolds the psychological aspects of racial discrimination on teenage minds and their fight against it which calls for the absolute prowess of their minds.

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