

# From Margin to Centre: Redefining the Black Adolescent Voice in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*

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**A. Jenifar Prasanna**

*B.A. English Literature  
Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore*

**A. Saleth Vensus Kumar**

*Assistant Professor of English  
Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore*

## Abstract

*Voice as a stylistic feature in literature is not just an element of style, but a significant place of power, identity and resistance. The present paper focuses on the ways in which Angie Thomas *The Hate U Give* (2017) reinvents the Black adolescent voice in the context of the modern Young Adult (YA) literature by moving it off of the margins and to the centre of the storyline. The novel introduces the realities of race, gender, class, and identity and with the help of the character of Starr Carter, the reader is provided with the truth of how Black adolescent males react to the constraints of systemic racism and how they construct their own selfhood. This paper is based on the concepts of Critical Race Theory, Black feminist theory, and intersectionality to examine how the fictional Starr is transformed into a talking woman instead of remaining silent about the wrongs in society. The analysis will be based on her code switching, her experience as a witness of the police oppression, and how the family and the community has shaped her voice. The novel *The Hate U Give* is also discussed in the paper together with other recent YA novels like *All American Boys*, *Dear Martin*, and *The Poet X* because, according to the author, the novel by Thomas is an essential change in the field of YA literature, as it allows more voices of marginalized youth to be heard in it.*

**Keywords:** Black Adolescent, Adult Literature, Intersectionality, Narrative, Racial Representation.

The voices of the Black teenagers were not highly represented in Young Adult (YA) literature over many years. In the previous tales, black characters were mostly depicted as secondary characters or stereotyped. They hardly had an opportunity to find a significant way of expressing their personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Due to this reason, their tales used to be at the periphery of literature. However, the YA literature began to shift over the last couple of years. There is an increase in writers who are devoted to the experience of Black youth. Not only do they portray them as victims of injustice, or injustice itself, but they also seek to challenge the society and attempt to defend themselves. Therefore, Black teens are gradually becoming better heard and even honored in modern literature, and *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas is one

such novel. The book tells the story of Starr Carter, a black teenager who is a witness of a police officer shooting her friend Khalil. This event compels Starr to ask herself some hard questions about racism, justice and her identity. She has fears and blankness at the beginning, but gradually she starts to realize the necessity of speaking out.. This essay claims that *The Hate U Give* has re-established narrative authority in Black adolescents not merely in terms of the themes but through structural, linguistic, and ethical means. When compared to other current works in the young adult (YA) genre, including *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, and *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, the novel is an indicator of a broader paradigm shift, specifically where YA literature is beginning to understand the marginalized youth as indispensable narratives of their own lives.

Experiences and lives of the white, middle-class young adults have long had a significant impact on the young adult literature. Usually, in the majority of cases, these characters were regarded as the standard or the universal depiction of the life of young adults. Instead, black characters were demonstrated actually as foreigners or secondary characters in these works. In other cases, they were stereotyped or just presented so that they were merely being used to enlighten the white readers on matters of racism and inequality. It was because of that the so called norm or the universal young adult life was postulated to be white. The problems of racism and inequality were depicted to be secondary concerns of the life of young adults in most cases. Nevertheless, this is not the American truth and the lives and experiences of Black young adults have been mostly ignored or stereotyped in the previous years.

Three theories have come in particularly handy to examine how *The Hate U Give* redefines the voice:

- Critical Race Theory (CRT) that considers the coverage of race and racism in society. This theory attempts to know the reason behind the use of explanation of various voices that are reflected in literature more than others are.
- Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks are among the scholars who attempt to inform the readers about what Black women and girls undergo, explaining how this experience can provide the readers with a clearer idea of society. These books are an attempt to demonstrate that these voices should be heard.
- Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies (e.g. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* written by Gayatri Spivak) Other researchers like Gayatri Spivak want to raise critical questions on whether there is a right or wrong to talk in the society, who is heard, and finally how a downtrodden individual speaks.

Researchers have initiated analysis of *The Hate U Give* as far as activism, identity, and representation is concerned. In a different article by Adam Levin, *Finding the Herstorical Narrative in the Angie Thomas book The Hate U Give*, Starr is perceived as transforming into an activist, and not as victim. The articles “Structural Racism in Angie Thomas *The Hate U Give*” by Geovani De Silva Anada and Muhd Al-Hafizh look at reinforced racial hegemony in institutions and media, which sets the world of Starr.

The character Starr Carter is presented as the center of interest of the novel even at the very first page of the novel. She is not portrayed as a voice of passions, but a voice in which the entire story is expressed. The story is inextricably linked with the voice, thoughts and feelings of Starr, as they occur throughout the novel. In this manner, by concentrating on the voice of Starr, Angie Thomas makes the narration center remain as connected to her voice. The life of Starr would be illustrated as a spillover between two worlds i.e. her house in Garden Heights and her school of Williamson Prep. It is presented that these two worlds have a lot of differences between them because at home, Starr is identified with her community, and at school, she is identified with an overwhelmingly white school setting. The voice used by Starr cannot be called a simple code or message but, on the contrary, it is full of uncertainty, complexity, guilt, and courage and development.

The formation and expression of self are major to Starr through language. Her code-switching is often so dramatic, as she adjusts slang, tone, diction, based on whether she is at home with her family members, or in school with whites. Thomas writes: "I must keep in mind where I am. I got to remember what I am. I managed to remember... who I am being with Williamson people vs. Garden Heights people" (Thomas, 29). This quote highlights the way in which the linguistic self of Starr is performative (i.e. performance becomes connected with power) and strategic. It also questions perceptions of the authentic Black speech in its simplicity there is the diversity, adaptability and demands of social expectation.

The aspect where Starr has reached to see the death of Khalil is one of the turning points in the story. Although it is a sad experience to the character, this is where she is also allowed to confront the questions of truth, justice and responsibility. During a period, Starr does not know and she is scared of the outcomes that can befall her should she decide to speak openly of the tragedy that she observed. But as the story goes on, she understands that the power of voice is needed in the meaning that it is a mechanism of contesting the narratives posed in an attempt to distort the image of Khalil and the circumstances under which he died. In this respect, the voice of the character is not merely the issue of self-expression, but it is also the problem related to the fight against injustice. What emerges in the voice of Starr here is civic and political; where she is no longer the seen object but the one who sees, criticizes, and wants things changed.

Starr's identity is layered. Being a Black teenager girl she is exposed to gendered racial stereotypes (e.g. how people present her as being too much, or too emotional). A social class is the other part of the life that has a great influence in Starr. Starr is born in Garden Heights, a working-class neighborhood but studies in Williamsons Prep that consists mainly of children belonging to more valuable backgrounds. This places her between two totally contrasting social classes. This brings the notion that she has to strike a balance on the various sides of her life. The other thing about the life of Starr that has a great impact on her is the trauma she experiences. She is greatly involved emotionally when she sees Khalil die. She has to live with fear, loss, confusions that she experiences and also to deal with the social pressures that attend the incident. Thus, the novel gives us the image of a complex and multifaceted identity of her. She cannot be classified within a single identity since she is affected by the numerous social factors.

Angie Thomas brings out the idea of racism in an institutionalized way throughout the novel, whereby she equates racism with the concepts of the law enforcers, then the justice system, followed by education and the media. To the society, the media is critical in how the event is understood following the death of Khalil. The media instead of emphasizing the unfairness of the shooting gives negative stereotypes about Khalil, whether it be drugs, gangs or criminal behavior. The media coverage of the event has an impact on how the society perceives the situation. The media accentuates Khalil as the enemy of the situation instead of killing a victim by violence. This is the concept that Starr comes to understand during the novel. Criticism Structural Racism in the novel of Angie Thomas asserts that the criticism that is directed at Thomas is not targeted at individual acts of racism, but at structural systems, the ways law enforcement and the media, as well as social expectation, reproduce racial inequity.

At the beginning, Starr is plagued by fear, of revenge, of being misunderstood, of losing security. However, she cannot remain silent as the plot continues to develop. The change in individual, internal opposition in to mass, vocal one is the very core. Starr needs to decide how to talk, when to talk and what talking is going to cost her and other people she loves. Her voice is made stronger by the fact she has a dynamic stakes (social, legal, personal).

The family and community assist Starr in her activism and dictate it through their support, which they owe. Her Family and community contribute greatly to her self-belief and her belief of justice

and proportions. Her father, Maverick, is the character who the protagonist looks up to since it is he who makes the protagonist comprehend the significance of self-respect and makes her realize that it is highly necessary to fight what is right and fair. Also so important in availing emotional support to Starr is her mother as Starr tries to come to terms with everything she has been through. All these forces make Starr realize the importance of being a courageous and responsible person. On this note, the neighborhood of Garden Heights is also used to develop her as an individual. The voice of protest, in the form of marches, demonstrations, community gatherings is turned into a chorus of voices of demand, of justice at the hands of Starr.

Protagonists of YA are traditionally in the process of identity discovery, first love, high school drama. *The Hate U Give* incorporates them, yet the integration of personal and political is transformative to the journey of Starr. To her development are challenges to institutions, race, morality and civic responsibility not as something imposed upon her, but as a part of who she is. Thus, Thomas redefines the ability of the YA protagonist to be (and even should be): morally capable in a situation of injustice.

*All American Boys* provides two points of view Rashad (Black) and Quinn (white). It is told by Rashad, the young black boy victimized by the police brutality, and by Quinn, the young white girl who has witnessed the incident. This enables the reader to observe that members of diverse races could have different interpretations of the same event. The dual narration gives the reader a chance to debate over the acts of race and injustice. Meanwhile, it gives a reader an opportunity to view the story through two stories. Conversely in the case of *The Hate U Give* all is centered in the characters of Starr Carter. *The Hate U Give* by Starr is singular in visions, offering interiority to Black teenagers without diluting that centre with a white observer as one of the lead characters.

Justyce addresses his letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the book *Dear Martin*, and her letters serve as a way to sort out her life with racial profiling, microaggressions, and violence. The novel also addresses several issue through the letters including racial profiling, discrimination and the experiences of the black youth. Similar to Starr, Justyce is also struggling to find his identity in society given the presence of racial inequality. *The Hate U Give* by Starr is also a self-discovery, and even the novel sends her to the streets after she feels the need to talk openly about the death of Khalil.

The verse novel Acevedo presents comes to voice of Xiomara, a Dominican-American teenage girl, whose spoken word poems are her form of resistance. Her story is lyrical, personal, with many references to the family and self. Similar to Starr, Xiomara struggles to be heard, with voice, with expectations. Their mode of conveying, however, is different. Xiomara uses poetry to express herself; this is a personal and artistic manner of expressing herself. Starr, however, is an actor in the discussion of justice, which includes the demonstrations and legal testifications. Thus, *The Hate U Give* presents a both personal voice and a political voice, an adolescent voice.

Commercial and critical success of works about Black young people has become more evident in *The Hate U Give* and YA literature overall. The fact that the novel became a New York Times bestseller weeks of it being published, published into a film, and read in countless schools testifies to the fact that, a novel that brings a voice to the oppressed and marginalized youth of today, is not only morally crucial but a potentially lucrative selling point. The success of Thomas has not only motivated publishers to pay more attention to different voices but also readers to anticipate more depth in the youthful representation.

The corrective action of *The Hate U Give*, manifested through its bestseller, award-winning, and film standing, is a cultural realignment. The boundaries that used to hold the black teenage tales are broken. This has symbolic significance: this narrative of black teenage girls is symbolically introduced in order to address the body of universal adolescence in discourse. The young adult

literature is now becoming a central part of diverse margins in reading cultures, marketing techniques, and awards as well as in teaching curricula.

The *Hate U Give* was popularized in the educational setting, where teachers pull the voice of Starr to introduce the dialogue on the racial, diplomatic, policing, and identity issues. The authenticity of the story allows students to get engaged in the discussion of the issues, which can be rarely discussed in traditional or canonical youthful adult literature. This has not prevented the novel and most schools have struggled and banned it, some educators and administrators have opposed its use due to the problems of language, content and so called politics. In the recent past, *The Hate U Give* has been removed in the Year 10 reading list in one of the UK schools after being accused of containing racially sensitive themes in the novel. Such banning, according to author Angie Thomas, was condemnable since it suppresses the voices of the already marginalized.

Although *The Hate U Give* is a voice giving film, its stance is challenged. Mandates, accusations of partisanship, and requests that the telling of stories keep some balance or be neutral puts pressure on Black adolescents to be heard. Furthermore, we may have a situation where such texts are commodified to an extent that they are perceived as a means by which whiteness is consumed, instead of being a place of Black subjectivity. Actually, it is acknowledged that the institutionalized racism which goes through our culture, the racism which permeates our beliefs, and the market which shapes our preferences have muted some voices and given prominence to others. By doing so, voice has undoubtedly been brought to the forefront, but still the question concerning the voice whose voice is heard, to what extent and with what authority is still debated.

*The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas is not just a book that tells about trauma as a young adult novel; it is a narrative reclamation act. In reality, the very fact that the voice of Starr Carter is in the center of the novel, that the center of the novel is her productive use of language and moral authority is an action of challenging the years-long tradition of silence and low status Black people have endured in America. The trip of Starr to voice, her trip to her identity concerning her use of language, her gender, her class, and her quest towards justice are all aimed at redefining the Black voice in the young adult literature.

Compared to *All American Boys*, *Dear Martin*, and *The Poet X*, *The Hate U Give* is remarkable as the poem maintains one view of Black adolescent life which is simultaneously internal, symbolic, and political. The effect, on its readers, on its publishers, on its role in classroom discussions, is indicative of a real change in the YA canon: that of making voices of the marginalized to be not merely included, but at the center of the narrative, with moral and civic rights and powers equal to any protagonist in her story. This movement is not, however, completely accomplished, completely safe. The politics of reversal through censorship and controversy and market forces are helpful in reminding us of the fragility of centrality. The next task between the YA writers, critics, and educators is to establish the point that marginal adolescent voices are not fringe phenomena, but important ones. *The Hate U Give* gives us the potent paradigm of such voice; we should erect such structures, publishing, curricula, criticism, whereby many more voices migrate to centre rather than the periphery.

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