

RACISM AND SENSE OF BELONGING: A PSYCHOSOCIAL STUDY OF ZOBOI AND SALAAM'S PUNCHING THE AIR

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ABSTRACT

*This research examines *Punching the Air* (2020), a novel by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam, which draws inspiration from the true story of Salaam, a wrongfully convicted teenager. The narrative highlights the pervasive discrimination faced by black individuals within a racially biased judicial system, reflecting broader themes of systemic racism embedded in American society. Through the lens of Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory, this study analyzes how trauma and oppression shape identity formation among black youth. The paper identifies various forms of oppression, including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, illustrating how these factors contribute to collective trauma in black communities. Furthermore, it explores specific issues such as educational disparities, healthcare inequalities, economic hardships, and the psychological impact of microaggressions. The results highlight the critical need for institutional reform, including judiciary to address these systematic inequalities. Ultimately, this research aims to illuminate the ongoing struggles of black individuals in a predominantly white society and the critical role of literature in fostering dialogue and understanding around racial injustice.*

Keywords: *belonging, psychosocial study, racism, Salaam, Zoboi.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Racism has become deeply rooted in white society, as White people consider themselves superior to others simply because of their race. This condition induces a feeling of inferiority among black people who live in white-dominated communities. *Punching The Air* (2020) was inspired by the life of Yusef Salaam, a 15-year-old teenager who was wrongfully accused, arrested, and convicted of raping a white woman in Central Park, in 1989. Through this incident as a case study embedded in the selected novel, this study highlights the discrimination faced by black people in white-dominated societies in terms of judicial matters. This systemic racism in various institutions like education, criminal justice, healthcare, and

employment leads to collective traumas that can limit opportunities. These inequalities are triggered by discriminating practices, economic inequalities, stereotypes, and intensified socioeconomic disparities. This study investigates the white racist society.

2. Literature Review

Frantz Fanon (1957) claimed that Europe has a racist structure. The outer appearance of a black person disrupts their native life and leads them to a negative outlook. The inferior complexes of blacks stems from the attitudes of whites. Not only the minority institution but also all black human beings feel inferior. The inborn child feels complex

because of a society based on color. Fanon (1957) explains the cognitive native, a man between two worlds, to highlight three phases by which the native intellectual strive for recognition. One recognizes the fact that children who have been treated as step children have entirely different personalities than other children, similar to the case of black children with inferiority complex (Fanon, 1957). The mind of a child develops at an early age because they have intuition. The inferiority complex refers to the feeling that a person is somehow inferior to others, which everyone is born with. Early interaction with family members, peers, and adults helps to identify the role of inferiority and superiority in individual's life (Fanon, 1957). bell hooks (1981) stated that racism is a structure of power that benefits certain groups while marginalizing and persecuting others. Racism operates as a function of power that gains advantages for certain groups while disadvantaging others. It contends that racism is not only a substance of individual bias but is also intricately embedded in the fabric of social structures, institutions and cultures. Racism is not a product of individual preconception but is deeply rooted within the construction and institutions of society (hooks, 1981)

According to hooks (1981), an individual's racial self-image is based on stereotypical messages that he experienced throughout his/her life, which in turn influence the individual's self-image and value, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. How black people get attention or face problems created by white people because of psychosocial development. She states that from childhood, some ethnic values, superiority complex and ego filled the minds of some white children or teens, which later became social problems for black people. Black and white people do not have different identities, and they view the world from different perspectives. Black people face ignorance, violence, and oppression in white society. Psychological development helps to understand the manipulation of whites toward black masses to oppress them by showing dominance and power, which is their strategy from the beginning (hooks, 1981). Jones (2000) argues that racism occurs in multiple forms and operates across group as well as individual levels. For him,

black people feel inferior to others because of traumas related to their skin color and white people feel superior because of their skin color. The collective experience of black individuals undoubtedly has been influenced by the history of systemic racism, slavery, and discrimination. This historical context can elevate one's awareness of potential social biases and encourage feelings of inferiority. Acknowledging and addressing this historical context are pivotal for understanding the complexities of an inferiority complex (Jones, 2000). W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) states that racism is not simply a matter of individual prejudice, but a deeply rooted system of racial control that people preserve through mass confinement and structural inequality. The most important bitter truth about society in the problem of the twentieth century for Bois is the color line. White is considered to be the color of superiority. Hence, the main issue of this century is the persistent challenge of racial discrimination, which succinctly captures the enduring impact of racism on society. Racism is a disease of the individual mind and a distortion of perception that denies humanity and values and perpetuates oppression. This mind game spread like a wild fire to destroy humanity and the concept of living together (Bois, 1903).

Carl Jung (1934) introduced the concept of inborn complexes as inherent patterns of mind energy that strongly influence individual psychological processes. According to Jung, all these complexes comprise collections of emotionally charged experiences and memories that are either inherited or acquired throughout human evolution. By organizing and regulating individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of inborn complexes that lay the groundwork for personality development throughout life and play a critical role in shaping unique psychological profiles. Jung's illumination of inborn complexes emphasizes the intricate nature of the human psyche and underscores the interplay between inherited vulnerability and environmental factors in shaping individuals' psychological acquaintance. Sigmund Freud (1915) introduced the notion of inborn complexes, also known as "archaic remnants," as vestiges of earliest instincts and drives that continuously influence human behavior at the subconscious level. Freud suggests that these complexes

represent residues of early developmental stages and evolutionary adaptations like manifesting as inherent predispositions and impulses that underlie individual psychological experiences. Operating beyond conscious awareness, inborn complexes exert potent influence on human behavior, causing unconscious motivations and desires that propel individuals' actions. Freud's understanding of inborn complexes illuminates the profound impact of developmental history on the human psyche, emphasizing the enduring legacy of primal instincts and driving factors that shape individual psychological composition. Karen Horney (1945) presented a psychodynamic viewpoint on inborn complexes, suggesting that they are expressions of psychoneurotic conflicts rooted in individuals' early childhood encounters. According to Horney, these complexes arise from unresolved emotional tensions and traumatic incidents experienced during childhood. By influencing individual perceptions and actions, inborn complexes preserve neurosis patterns and ineffective coping mechanisms, contributing to psychological distress. Horney's interpretation of inborn complexes shed light on the enduring impact of childhood experiences on adult personality and emphasizes the significance of unresolved emotional conflicts in shaping individuals' psychological well-being. Her insights into the nature of inborn complexes deepen our understanding of the complexities of human psychology and the enduring influence of early life development (Horney, 1945).

3. Theoretical Framework

Erikson (1968), in his influential work "Identity: Youth and Crisis", introduces a psychological framework that highlights identity crisis as a fundamental stage of human development. According to Erikson, identity crises are evident as periods of deep self-analysis and exploration typically present during adolescence and young adulthood. During this phase, individuals grapple with questions surrounding their identity, purpose, and sense of belonging. Erikson suggests that navigating this stage leads to the establishment of coherent self-identity, which is marked by a clear understanding of one's values, beliefs, circumstances and aspirations. Robert J.

Havighurst (1972) foregrounds the importance of Erikson's psychosocial theory in clarifying people's developmental tasks and obstacles at various stages of life. Havighurst argues that Erikson's framework serves as a valuable guide for comprehending the different paths of human development that span from infancy to old age and also outlines the crucial tasks and conflicts that form individuals' lives. By shedding light on the interplay between internal psychological dynamics and external social influences not only this but Erikson's theory also offers insights into the complexities of human growth and maturity, fostering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of the human experience. Havighurst's evaluation highlights the undergoing significance of Erikson's contributions to developmental psychology by focusing on the practicality of his theory as a framework for understanding the intricacies of human development throughout life.

The psychological development theory proposed by Erikson (1968) defines how humans develop cognitive and social skills throughout their lives. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development offers a way of thinking against which we, as educators, can measure students' development and how the college environment may inhibit or enhance such development (Parker, 1978). The feeling of inferiority begins in childhood. Infants are small, incomplete, and weak; they feel inferior and powerless. The impact of a racist society on in born children leads to an inferiority complex that breaks self-esteem. The phrase 'identity crisis' is intimately related to Erikson's theory and plays a vital role in recognizing the provocation of individuals that occur through teenage years. An identity crisis refers to a phase of intensified self-investigation and questioning in which individuals confront the difficulty of their identity. This crisis is not a morbid circumstance but rather a standardizing feature of development, an obligatory grappling exercise for self-finding and identity evolution. The victorious intentions of an identity crisis demand the blending of several aspects of one's identity into a rational whole. Erikson's emphasis on the role of culture and society distinguishes his theory from more individual-focused developmental perspectives.

He argued that individuals are not passive recipients of societal expectations but actively engage with their cultural context (Erikson, 1963). Culture shapes the developmental tasks and challenges individuals encounter at each stage and influences the nature and resolution of psychosocial crises. Leading to Erikson's theory (1963) is the notion of ego identity. Erikson suggests that the individual is a dynamic and evolving organization shaped by constant inter-linkage between individual involvement and societal expectations. Ego identity appears as a subjective sense of continuity and consistency in one's self-impression. This concept acknowledges that identity is not a stable entity but rather a complicated and developing combination of numerous elements, including roles, principles, beliefs, and interpersonal correspondence.

4. Text Analysis

Punching The Air by Yusef Salaam and Ibi Zoboi is a powerful and touching account of the enduring impact of racial injustice on individuals and communities. Through the lens of the main character, the novel reveals the extensive nature of systemic racism in American society, especially within the criminal justice system. In addition, as readers witness Amal's journey of resilience and self-discovery, they defying the harsh realities of discrimination, inequality, and prejudice faced by black individuals. *Punching The Air* works as a cry for justice and equality by persuading readers to confront and deconstruct oppression structures that continue to marginalize marginalized communities. Through its clear description and profound insights, the novel affirms the power of art and activism in the fight against racial injustice. *Punching The Air* by Yusef Salaam and Ibi Zoboi provides a sorrowful description that resonates with the psychosocial theory of Erikson (1968) through the protagonist journey of Amal and the novel clearly illustrates the challenges faced by young black men in creating their identity within a global society with racial injustice. Stages of Erikson's psychosocial development, especially the stage of identity versus role confusion, parallel to grappling with Amal to identify his individuality and integrity despite societal stereotypes and systemic oppression. Amal's resilience and self-

discovery are then reminded of the importance of confronting societal barriers to achieve a sense of identity and purpose. *Punching the Air* is a poignant reminder of the psychosocial challenges inherent in the pursuit of justice and equality, that is, deconstructing oppressive systems and working toward positive social change.

Punching The Air (2020) offers a fresh perspective on wrong convictions of African Americans in white society. While we know Amal is not guilty of the brutal attack on Jeremy Mathis, a young white boy, there are hints that he was present and involved to some extent. Salaam and Zoboi investigate the intrinsic flaws of the justice system by highlighting how Amal, despite playing a minor role, faces severe punishment for his actions. All these narratives challenge readers to confront the reality that Amal's race directly influences the severity of his punishment. Through touching scenes, this book serves as a reminder of the racial disparities ingrained in society and the inherent unfairness they perpetuate an examination of inequality within the criminal judicial justice system (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020). It is set against the backdrop of a real-life trial of one of the 'Central Park jogger' teens. The poetics verses display beauty and the narrative and character portrayals submit to conventional young adult tropes rather than offer innovative paths. The challenges and complexities of racial inconsistency within the criminal justice system pose challenges for younger readers. However, it is crucial for white teenagers to understand the contributing factors to mass incarceration, including media influence, access to resources, cultural dynamics, and fear, to actively engage all these issues. Zoboi adeptly navigates these themes drawn from the proficiency of Salaam, the co-author and a victim of wrongful conviction in the infamous 'Central Park jogger' case in 1980s. The courtroom in *Punching The Air* (2020) presents a trail of injustice in which Amal confronts the bitter realities of a biased American legal system. Despite his innocence, Amal finds himself trapped in a web of false accusations and prejudiced court judgments. The courtroom becomes a battlefield where truth struggles against prejudice as Amal fights the intimidating task of proving his innocence despite systemic inequalities. Through vivid courtroom

scenes, the novel exposes the inherent flaws of the justice system by exposing its failure to uphold the principles of fairness and equality for all (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020).

The novel *Punching The Air* is written in a scene shifting life from memories to court room then again from court room to his childhood memories. Amal was born with an old soul, which is similar to having a silent observer within one who carries the weight of old knowledge and experience. It is also an instinctive understanding of life's complexities; it is a perception that transcends the boundaries of time. An old soul remains unseen behind the outward markers of declining aged, wrinkled skin, gray hair, and eyes that hold the replica of an unlimited lifetime. In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, this hidden wisdom is mostly unnoticed. People may not recognize the old soul among them because they quietly navigate the currents of existence and absorb the joys and sorrows of this world (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020). But in moments of dignity like within the walls of a courtroom, its presence becomes noticeable. Among the lawsuit and the pursuit of justice, the old soul stands as a silent sentinel witnessing the complexities of human nature in the courtroom's empty chambers where truth is called upon and justice is administered by the essence of the old soul. Although his voice remains unheard during arguments and debates, his silent wisdom is evident. It serves as a reminder of the timeless nature of the human spirit. Also, of the resilience forged through trials and tribulations. The presence of an old soul in such a setting affirms the depth of human experience and serves as a beacon of enlightenment in times of turmoil. The scene shifted to the courtroom about how it appears and the courtroom is not a flashy music video set, nor does it resemble the excitement of Coachella or the glitz of award shows like the BET Awards or the Grammys. It lacks the glamor of MTV or VH1, yet in its sober atmosphere, an audience remains present, with judges, experts, and spectators peering through filtered lenses like scrutinizing every detail. They interpret a hoodie as a disguise, innocent gestures as signs of affiliation and academic struggles as signs of incompetence. Every aspect of Amal's life and his experiences are distilled into a single verdict, guilt. Despite the

absence of cheering fans, the courtroom holds its own kind of scrutiny where judgments are made not based on applause or adoration but on the recognized truth of one's actions and character (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020).

Punching The Air (2020) presents a powerful call to action against racism by persuading readers to recognize and dismantle the structures of inequality that continue to marginalize black communities on a larger and smaller scale. *Punching The Air* by giving voice to the silenced narratives of those affected by racial injustice, this poem is a profound testament to the resilience and strength of the human spirit in the face of misfortune. Umi advised him to wear a grey suit, however, he refused: "But that gray didn't make me any less Black My white lawyer didn't make me any less Black" (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 16). In the presence of white, the gray shade did not diminish his identity as a black person. Like this, having a white lawyer didn't change his blackness. Words themselves have the power to simplify complex issues by reducing them to dual difference. Perhaps ideas possess their own biases and perpetuate a narrative that divides the world into black and white and allows for the comparison of bygone eras of separation. While social media movements and activists continue to make a significant impact in black communities, black perspectives continue to be embedded, as though one is looking at the world through the prism of a primitive television show. The struggle for equality persists, but black's minds continue to interpret reality through prearranged frameworks, giving everything in stark black and white. "The white space on the page also tells a story, is part of the big picture" (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 12). Ms. Rinaldi in art class focused on the importance of white space on a page by explaining that it too conveys meaning and contributes to the overall structure. Initially, Amal struggled to understand the concept. Her lesson became clear when she presented us with a painting that mimicked the optical illusion of an artwork. The artwork features a white face against a black background. However, upon closer examination from different angles, the image changed, revealing a black face with the same features against a white background. The experience was surreal, as Amal's eyes played

tricks on him, changing his perception of the painting as each shift in perspective. Despite the fact that what struck him most was the realization that it was his mind, not only in his eyes, that made sense of the illusion, but his brain's ability to interpret visual cues and adjust complex information allowed him to comprehend the true nature of the artwork. Disclosure that underscores the complexity of human perception and mind cognition also reveals how our minds can manipulate sensory input to create coherent interpretations of the world around us, and it also illuminates the personal nature of reality, reminding us that what people see and understand is often shaped by their individual perspectives and experiences. This lively lesson taught him to appreciate the power of perception and the inherent complexity of interpretation. It served as a touching reminder that our minds can both deceive and enlighten us by shaping our understanding of the world in so many ways.

Amal recalls a trip that never came to be and the Door of No Return. His entire life had everything leading up to that courtroom, but it felt such as Africa and a vast expanse of uncertainty and possibility. But now, as he stands before the trial before that fateful night, it's as if he has reached the threshold of the Door of No Return, symbolizing his departure into the unknown. Maybe in jail, maybe the harsh reality awaiting me is America. As the officer's grip tightens on his arm, his nails dig into his skin, sending a flaming sensation through his body (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020). It is as if he is grasping a blood vessel by cutting off circulation, and his heart feels constricted, suffocating within his chest. Gritting his teeth, he tenses every muscle and willing himself to be as unyielding as steel and unbreakable as iron. At that moment, he was clinging to the hope that he has superhuman strength to endure the ordeal unfolding before him. Among the uncertainty and fear, hope also became his life line. He was hoping the walls would not choke him. He hopes he will have the flexibility to endure the pain that awaits. He hopes for the opportunity to heal and mend his wounds. With each passing moment, he hopes to discover a strength within himself that exceeds his expectations. Amal clings to the belief that the

knowledge he has acquired from the books he has devoured will offer him a lifeline that will guide him through darkness. He hopes his mind and intellect will serve as formidable muscles capable of enduring the challenges ahead. In his most desperate moments, he dares to hope for superpowers that can build resilience that borders on the extraordinary (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020). Among the chaos and despair, hope remains his beacon of light, guiding him toward an uncertain yet hopeful future.

The book's profound traumatic impact is felt in Amal's life, the protagonist, and the readers. Employing theoretical frameworks such as psychological developmental theory, the study seeks to elucidate the parallels between Salaam's experiences and those of the main character. Central to these findings is the deep portrayal of the protagonist's psychological trauma and his realistic journey toward healing, notably through the transformative power of art. Through this exploration, this research underscores the pervasive discrimination faced by African Americans while shedding light on the protagonist's courageous struggle to overcome adversity. The theory proposed by Erikson (1963, 1968) recognizes that psychosocial crises arise at various stages of life, such as during teenage years, adulthood, and later stages. Understanding how individuals navigate these crises allows for thorough investigation of developmental challenges. By applying Erikson's theory to the study of trauma enable the exploration into how individuals navigate disagreeable experiences and construct strength. Understanding the impact of trauma on ego identity and crisis resolution, and virtue development enhances the understanding of psychosocial growth.

5. Concluded

Punching The Air by Salaam and Zoboi skillfully conveys different themes. The themes of racial injustice, identity formation, and resilience are closely aligned with the psychosocial theory of Erikson (1968). In *Punching The Air*, Amal's uproarious journey clearly represents the psychosocial struggles faced by minors within racial societies. Pursuit for Amal's self-discovery and redemption in the Erikson concept of identity

development highlights the tension between identity acquirement and role absurdity. By navigating adversity and embracing his artistic expression, Amal embodies Erikson's vision and healthy psychosocial development, despite facing systemic hurdles. *Punching The Air* not only works as a captivating narrative but also highlights the persistent systemic racism in various institutions like education, criminal justice, healthcare, and employment.

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