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The Complexity of *The Hate U Give*

by Esther Alexander

The 2018 N.A.A.C.P. award-winning film, "*The Hate U Give*," examines the perspective of an African American teen living in a predominantly black neighborhood while attending a wealthy white high school. Director George Tillman Jr. highlights the main character's (Starr Carter) experiences as she is victimized by the stigmatization targeted toward people in her community, especially when Starr witnesses a friend, Khalil Harris, fall victim to the horrors of being a person of color in America. Moments like these provoked acts of activism as the film progressed, with cultural and societal aspects of police brutality, racism, and prejudice that incentivized the "Black Lives Matter" protest, making the film resonate with current societal and even political issues involving African Americans. The film's cultural significance touches on stereotypes that African American communities endure when faced with prejudice on the justification of violence and racism that black youth and adults encounter daily.

The film opens with Maverick, Starr's father, educating his children about how people of color need to act differently when around police. He emphasizes that the melanin in their skin can be seen as a threat that can easily arouse violence between themselves and police officers. Maverick states, "Now, just cause we gotta deal with this mess, don't you ever forget that being black is an honor 'cause you come from greatness" (2:33). As a black father, Maverick feels that it is his responsibility to educate his children on police brutality and violence attributed to black people. He feels that these conversations are essential and must be had, which is consequential in black parenting methods. Black youth are often instilled with the knowledge of how dangerous it

is to be a minority from an early age, but still, they should not be ashamed of their race. They are taught how to act, what to say and not say, and how to deal with potentially racist individuals. It is the harsh reality of preparing them for interactions with those who are not the same skin tone as them, and it braces them for the cruel viewpoint that some people have about such minorities—Maverick teaches his kids that they could be seen as a threat even when they are not.

Throughout the film's progression, the audience is given insight into the harshness of the societal stigma pointed towards minorities, especially when the character, Khalil, is shot by a white officer for simply pulling out a hairbrush. The film captured his murder as a moment that has happened many times before; it profusely set the movie's foundation. The film touches on more profound perspectives of actual occurrences in our society, such as police brutality, discrimination, and targeted violence towards black communities.

For example, shortly after Khalil's funeral is hosted, the anger and desperation within the black community drive the fuel necessary in leading the protests after being kept silent. "But here we are again," expresses April Oprah as she leads the family and supporters of Khalil in protest. "Violence, brutality. It's the same story, just a different name. Another unarmed, young black man. It is impossible to be unarmed when our blackness is the weapon that they fear" (53:35). The cultural significance of *"The Hate U Give"* is compelling. It examines and educates us on how societal ideologies based on race are enforced in ways that justify racism and prejudice, hindering the achievement of social, economic, and political goals of equality for people of color. The truth is the endless cycle of adopting racial and stereotypical beliefs from generation to generation is complex. Although revolutionary movements of revolt against injustice are often incited, the consequences are not always ideal.

The film's title incorporates the concept of T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E., an acronym penned by the illustrious Tupac Shakur, which breaks down the maliciousness of the system and its way of setting up the black people trapped within it for failure, with conclusively no chance at breaking out of the cycle. According to Owen Gleiberman's "The Hate U Give': A Racial Drama So Honest Every American Should See It" published by *Variety*, "The title "*The Hate U Give*" comes from Tupac Shakur's *j'accuse* aphorism "The Hate U Give Little Infants F—s Everybody" [i.e., THUG LIFE], and the movie is about tracing cycles of violence back to their racist American roots." This concept becomes an essential topic of discussion for Khalil and Starr as they sit in the car and discuss this powerful acronym minutes before a police officer ruthlessly snatches Khalil's life. Khalil goes on to provide Starr with a profound meaning of what it truly means, "Meaning what society gives to us when we little comes back to bite them in the ass when we grow up and we wild out" (20:23). Essentially, the concept of societal violence is a cycle that can never be escaped since it keeps people of color in a state of perpetual despair as they try to prosper in a world that continues to imprison them. Maverick continues to educate his daughter, Starr, on the real intentions of society imposed upon black people, affirming that "Pac was trying to school us on how the system's designed against us. Why else do you think so many people in our neighborhood deal? And there ain't no real jobs around here, so they fall into the trap" (48:28). Some may resort to the dealing of drugs, while others may try to escape this vicious trap, only to end up in a battle within themselves and no proper source of income or prosperity. Either way, the film is explicit in making this clear.

The ultimate message of this film is revealed when Starr finally has an epiphany, realizing that she is the one who must speak up for Khalil as he can no longer do so for himself. Being the only witness who observed what truly happened to Khalil leaves her in a challenging

predicament where she must decide whether her loyalty lies with her best friend or the streets she has been brought up in since a child. While the law of the streets demands that she remains silent to protect herself and her family, her silence also defies what happens to Khalil's murderer and whether or not he is indicted. Her mother also influences her to fear negative attention and retaliation that would threaten her family's safety, which pins her in between two walls. King, the leader of the King Lords, continuously threatens Starr and warns her of the consequences that should come if she decides to testify. "You really should try and keep her out of trouble," he says, "I'm just saying I think it's best if she don't talk to Five-O" (44:19). However, Starr does not fail in distinguishing right from wrong, realizing that her most powerful weapon is her voice. From this point forward, she defies the pressures coming from both her family and the streets, deciding that her sole purpose is to speak up and earn the justice Khalil's life deserves. Starr even goes as far as to question her own uncle's ideologies - a police officer himself, forcing him to question his morals regarding stereotypes of people of color. "What if you were in a white neighborhood," she asks him, "and it was a white man wearing a suit, driving a Mercedes? If you saw him reach into the window, would you shoot him, or would you say, "Put your hands up?" Ultimately, Starr's determination to speak up and raise awareness on the vicious cycles of racism and prejudice became the blueprint for stimulating change in societal norms that influenced her to take matters into her own hands and spur justice movements.

African American communities face prejudice on justifications for violence and racism that both youth and adults face every day. *The Hate U Give* does an excellent job revealing stereotypes that adversely affect their communities. A crucial method of this message involves demonstrating complex discussions that black adults have with youths and among themselves. Additionally, the film illustrates how police brutality affects a community, how the long-term

consequences of death affect a community and its witnesses, and how difficult it is to obtain justice for the victim. Media coverage of true stories like these helps raise awareness and leads to tough conversations regarding racism, police brutality, and justice.

Works Cited

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