
Injustice in *Punching the Air* Novel by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam

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This research focuses on injustice in the novel *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. This novel presents the struggle of each character very epically, namely the struggle of Black people in the face of White people's discrimination against them, where they are the minority. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method, and the data collection technique in this research is the analysis method, which interprets the novel *Punching the Air*. Through this analysis, it can be found that the novel *Punching the Air* provides a powerful exploration of injustice, mainly focusing on racial bias and the profound consequences of a legal system that often fails to protect the rights and dignity of marginalized individuals. By using hegemony theory, this research can highlight the efforts of individuals to fight injustice. The research contributes to the understanding that literary works can reflect and critique oppressive injustices.

INTRODUCTION

Social injustice is a situation where someone is not treated as they should be. Where someone is treated unequally, unfairly, or denied the rights they deserve. Social injustice itself starts with preferential treatment by a group towards certain people. According to (Pettit, 1974) in his book *A Theory of Justice*, social injustice occurs when a person's basic rights are deprived or not given. This preferential treatment can be based on certain factors such as racism, discrimination, sexism, and so on. Social injustice can affect almost all aspects of people's lives. Karl Marx proposed that social injustice can lead to civil unrest, wrongful convictions in court, community ostracization, unemployment, and many more.

One injustice that often attracts public attention is racism and legal injustice. "Racism is an organized social system in which the dominant racial group, based on an ideology of inferiority, categorizes and ranks people into social groups called "races" and uses its power to devalue, disempower, and differentially allocate valued societal resources and opportunities to groups defined as inferior" (Williams et al., 2019). Racism can take many forms, from negative stereotyping and discriminatory treatment to physical and mental violence perpetrated against certain individuals or groups.

Legal injustice itself can occur when the legal system does not provide equal treatment for everyone, so certain individuals or groups are disadvantaged, and some are advantaged. The injustice of the legal system exacerbates social inequalities and can result in a loss of public trust in legal institutions. This injustice can take many forms, such as bias in court decisions, discrimination in law enforcement, or disparities in access to legal aid for the less well-off. The basic principle of justice is that it belongs to all human beings. No matter rich or poor. No matter what the social strata are. No matter what his position is. No matter who the master is. Equality, without legal distinction, for every human being. But in reality, it is the weak, those without financial strength or support, and those who often receive injustice. "One kind of injustice is the failure of judges and others in authority to adhere to the appropriate rules or interpretations thereof in deciding claims" (Pettit, 1974).

The novel *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam is one of the novels with the theme of racism. *Punching the Air* is a young adult novel written by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam. The novel, published in 2020, tells the story of Amal Shahid, a teenage artist who is wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit. The novel is written in verse format,

which adds a poetic and impactful layer to the narrative. In *Punching the Air*, the theme of injustice is central to the narrative. The novel explores various aspects of injustice, particularly within the context of racial bias and the legal system.

Based on the explanation above, this research focuses on injustice in the novel *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. "Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony Theory is an idea coming from the Selection from Prison Notebooks between 1929-1935. This hegemonic theory analyzes various power relations and oppression in society. This theory was developed as an early definition to refer to the social class domination toward other social classes in society through cultural hegemony" (Habiburrahman, 2017). Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, outlined in his Prison Notebooks, emphasizes the ways in which a dominant group maintains control, not only through coercive power but also through cultural and ideological leadership. (Gramsci, 1971) conceptualizes hegemony as the ruling class's ability to shape and normalize societal beliefs, values, and norms through institutions in civil society (e.g., schools, churches, and media).

The novel *Punching the Air* presents the struggle of each character very epically, namely the struggle of Black people in the face of White people's discrimination against them, where they are the minority. Researching the theme of injustice in *Punching the Air* is a very important endeavor to understand social reality, raise awareness, and encourage change. Through this research, we can contribute to building a more just society.

The structure of this article includes an abstract, introduction, literature review, research methods, findings and discussion, and finally, a conclusion. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. The data collection technique in this research is the analysis method, which interprets the novel *Punching the Air*. The main purpose of this research is to understand more about forms of social injustice such as racism, discrimination, and the criminal justice system. Especially those experienced by minorities, that is, Black people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The only study that uses *Punching the Air* as an object is by (Chaima, 2022). This research explores institutional racism and its traumatic effects on Amal, the main character, using a qualitative interpretative approach. The protagonist, Amal, is treated unfairly due to systemic bias that disproportionately targets African Americans. Amal's

wrongful incarceration causes race-based traumatic stress, demonstrating the profound psychological impact of institutional discrimination. His mental health was compromised as a result of unfair treatment, reflecting a pattern of trauma common to marginalized individuals affected by the criminal justice system. Therefore, there has been no research on the forms of injustice in the novel *Punching the Air*, so this research was conducted.

RESEARCH METHODS

In conducting this research, the researcher applied a descriptive qualitative method, which guided the researchers to be more sensitive, utilizing their intellectual capacities (Hatch, 2002). (Dawson, 2019) said that “Qualitative research explores attitudes, behavior and experiences through such methods as interviews or focus groups.” The main source of data comes from the novel *Punching the Air*. The researcher selectively took some quotes from the novel and included them in the main data source. The researcher also took supporting data from various materials, including books, theses, journals, articles, and other relevant sources related to this research.

The data collection technique in this research is the analysis method, which interprets the novel *Punching the Air*. The steps of data collection include the researcher conducting interpretation through careful reading of the novel *Punching the Air*. Then, the researcher will identify the elements of racism experienced by the main character in the novel. The researcher will then identify and classify quotations that show the element of racial bias and legal injustice using Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Then, the researcher looks for external sources such as journal articles, theses, or other related research to support her argument.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Hegemony, as theorized by Antonio Gramsci, refers to the dominance of a particular social group or class over others through a combination of force and consent. In the context of *Punching the Air*, the novel explores injustice as a central theme that illustrates the dominance that the majority, namely White people, have over the minority, namely Black people. Therefore, we will discuss (1) how *Punching the Air* portrays the dominance and power that White people have over Black people and (2) how *Punching the Air* represents the injustice experienced by Black people. The forms of injustice depicted in the novel *Punching the Air* are as follows:

Racial Bias

Punching the Air is a novel that explores themes of racial bias. It tells the story of Amal Sahid, a Black teenager who is unjustly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. The novel highlights how racial bias can affect almost every aspect of life, from law enforcement to educational opportunities and media stereotypes. There are four Key themes of racial bias in *Punching the Air* that are:

Racial Injustice

The novel explores the injustices experienced by the main character, Amal. He encounters racial inequality that exists within the criminal justice system. Amal Shahid, the protagonist, is a Black teenager who is victimized by racial profiling and unfairly punished for a crime he did not commit. The narrative highlights the systemic racism that can lead to unfair treatment and prejudice in the legal system. It highlights how race can influence perceptions, judgements and outcomes in the criminal justice system. Amal, despite his talents and creativity, is consistently judged as a threat due to his skin color. Throughout the novel, he reflects on being labeled as “angry” or “violent” simply because he is a young Black male.

*“Did you ever see Amal get angry?” the prosecutor asked Ms. Rinaldi
“Did Amal ever display emotions that were”— “Yes, Ms. Rinaldi said
That’s why I work so hard with Amal To channel his anger into his art” (Zoboi & Salaam,
2020, page 19)*

The above quote shows that Ms. Rinaldi, Amal’s teacher, testified in court that Amal was a hot-tempered person. The quote depicts Amal as having strong emotions, easily angered, seen as negative in a legal context. When the prosecutor asks if Amal ever gets angry, it portrays anger as a dangerous trait or potential evidence of violent tendencies. However, Ms. Rinaldi, Amal’s art teacher, explained that she was trying to help Amal channel his anger through art.

*And I know, I know
that right then and there
she didn’t even have to look my way
because she won’t see me
She’s never seen me
She only sees my paintings and drawings
as if me and what I create
are two different worlds (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, page 19)*

The quote expresses Amal’s feelings that Ms. Rinaldi, her art teacher, only sees him through his artwork. She never saw Amal as himself as an individual. Ms. Rinaldi sees

him and his art as two separate things, Ms. Rinaldi appreciates his talent, but she doesn't see him as an individual. It is known that Ms. Rinaldi does not like Amal. She never pays attention to Amal. Then how did she know that Amal was a grumpy person. It's all because Amal is a Black person.

Media Stereotypes

The novel highlights how media stereotypes can shape public perception, reinforce prejudice, and limit opportunities for Black people. In *Punching the Air*, the media is one of the factors that exacerbate stereotypes against Amal. Through media prejudice, Amal as a Black person is portrayed as often violent and criminal, even before the facts of his case are established. The media in this novel characterized his story in a way that reinforced the public's view that he was an abuser, even though the evidence and the actual story were unclear.

*There were more witnesses
from East Hills
than from my side of the hood...* (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, page 24)

The testimonies of people who were at the scene put Amal in a difficult position. There was even a student who recorded the moment Amal hit Jeremy.

*I threw the first punch but not the last—
I didn't do it* (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, page 58)

The quote shows that Amal denies the allegations against him that he caused Jeremy Mathis to fall into a coma. The truth is that Amal only struck the first punch, and he did not cause Jeremy to go into a coma.

*The prosecutor, with his fancy words
his hard evidence
wrote the script, directed the scene
cast just the right actor
to play this kid from the hood
who beat up a white kid really bad* (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, page 33)

This quote emphasizes how Amal feels that he is stereotyped and reduced to a character in a narrative designed by others, reflecting a broader theme of how the media often portrays young Black people as violent or criminal without fully understanding or representing the complexities that lie within.

Educational Opportunities

Punching the Air explores the limited educational opportunities faced by Black individuals, especially those from marginalized communities. It highlights the ways in which systemic racism and socioeconomic disparities can hinder access to quality

education. In the novel *Punching the Air*, educational opportunities for Amal play an important role, both in his life before and during his incarceration. Amal is a talented artist who initially attended East Hills High School for the Arts, a specialized art school, which gave him access to develop his artistic and intellectual skills. However, when he was arrested and sent to prison, he was deprived of this opportunity. During his time in detention, he attended classes with limited educational programs that were less supportive of his creative and academic development. The prison environment, with its rules and systems, sought to suppress him.

*Ms. Rinaldi taught AP Art History
and for whatever reason
Advanced Placement seemed to be
only for the white kids at my school
But there I was in my only AP class
the only lack kid in the room (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, page 142)*

This quote highlights how Amal noticed racial disparities in educational opportunities, with Advanced Placement classes primarily available to White students, limiting opportunities for Black students like him.

White Privilege

White privilege in this novel can be seen through how society, the media, and the law view Amal and Jeremy Mathis, White teenagers who were victims of the attack. From the beginning, Amal has been labeled as guilty and it is as if his skin color makes him the main suspect. The biased legal system gives more protection to White teenagers and punishes Amal more harshly just because of his racial identity. Amal is convicted without solid evidence, largely because the system is predisposed to believe that a Black boy must be guilty. This theme underscores the deep inequities in the judicial system, where Black defendants are more likely to be convicted and receive harsher sentences than their White peers.

*All because
we were in the wrong place
we were in the wrong skins... (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, page 211)*

This section emphasizes how societal perceptions and biases lead to the unfair treatment of Black individuals like Amal, comparing their experiences to White individuals who may not face the same scrutiny or consequences. That Black people will be more easily blamed than White people.

Legal Injustice

The novel portrays the devastating consequences of a legal system that fails to ensure justice for all. The protagonist, Amal Shahid, is wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit. Amal's experience highlights the issue of wrongful convictions, emphasizing how individuals, especially those from minority backgrounds, can be wrongly accused and convicted based on stereotypes and biases. This serves as a powerful example of the flaws within the legal system, where individuals, especially those from marginalized communities, can be unfairly targeted and convicted. There are two Key themes of racial bias in *Punching the Air*, that are:

Wrongful Conviction

Wrongful conviction is the main theme of *Punching the Air*. Amal, a Black teenager who is talented in art, is sent to prison for assaulting a White teenager even though there is no solid evidence that he is guilty. During the trial, almost all witnesses testify against him even though he has an alibi in his defense. The novel portrays the devastating consequences of a legal system that fails to ensure justice for all. The protagonist, Amal Shahid, is wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit. Amal's experience highlights the issue of wrongful convictions, emphasizing how individuals, especially those from minority backgrounds, can be wrongly accused and convicted based on stereotypes and biases. This serves as a powerful example of the flaws within the legal system, where individuals, especially those from marginalized communities, can be unfairly targeted and convicted.

*But wrong time, wrong place
doesn't make you automatically guilty...* (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, page 275)

This quote shows Amal's frustration with the justice system, highlighting how systemic bias leads to wrongful convictions of Black individuals, like himself, who are considered guilty by default.

The Prison System as a Punitive Institution

The novel *Punching the Air* highlights the harsh and inhumane conditions faced by prisoners, especially those from marginalized communities. The prison system is portrayed as an institution that punishes rather than educates or heals, especially for Black teenagers like Amal Shahid. Amal, who has been wrongfully convicted, is imprisoned in a place that not only limits his physically but also educationally, mentally, and emotionally. The prison in this novel is shown as a harsh and repressive environment,

where his every move is monitored, regulated, and often suppressed. Instead of being facilitated to develop or given a chance to improve.

*So when you did whatever you did
or whatever they think you did
Your life your whole damn life
belongs to them (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, page 281)*

This quote captures the essence of how the prison system exerts control over individuals, stripping them of their autonomy and treating them as property of the state. It emphasizes the punitive nature of incarceration, where prisoners' lives are largely dictated by the system.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this research contributes to the understanding that a literary works can reflect and critique oppressive injustices. *Punching the Air* provides a powerful and poignant exploration of injustice, particularly focusing on racial bias and the profound consequences of a legal system that often fails to protect the rights and dignity of marginalized individuals. The novel is intended to provoke thought and discussion about the criminal justice system, racial injustice, and the importance of empathy and understanding. The novel draws attention to the real-life consequences of wrongful convictions and the need for reform in the legal system. *Punching the Air* provides a powerful and poignant exploration of injustice, particularly focusing on racial bias and the profound consequences of a legal system that often fails to protect the rights and dignity of marginalized individuals. In addition, the novel also invites readers to reflect on how power operates within the fabric of society and how individuals navigate and resist these dynamics in pursuit of justice and self-determination.

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