

## Uncovering the History Behind *Punching the Air* Novel by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam

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This research analyzes the issue of racial injustice as depicted in *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam, a novel that highlights the discriminatory attitudes African Americans face in the criminal justice system. The story is based on the real-life experience of Yousef Salaam, a member of the Central Park Five, who was unjustly convicted as a teenager for a crime he never committed. By examining the relationship between Salaam's personal history and the narrative of *Punching the Air*, this study aims to reveal how fiction can reflect and reframe real events about racial inequality. Using Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, this research identifies elements of transformation and adaptation in the novel and compares them to Salaam's true story. A descriptive qualitative approach is used to analyze the transposition of themes, plot structures, and character experiences from Salaam's life into the novel. The findings provide insights into how intertextuality shapes literary plot development, especially in works inspired by historical events.

## INTRODUCTION

Injustice is a global issue that significantly impacts individuals and society. Injustice often results from systemic inequalities based on race, class, and other social factors. Injustice accompanies discrimination and marginalization (Alexander, 2012, p. 63). Injustice can shape personal experiences and influence societal structures, raising awareness and advocating for change. Literature plays a vital role in this process by offering narratives highlighting marginalized people's struggles and demonstrating empathy and social understanding.

Literary works use stories to help readers connect with abstract themes such as injustice on a human level (Meyer, 2018, p. 25). Literary works convey individuals' feelings and obstacles when discriminated against, making these complex topics more tangible. As Nurhamidah et al. (2019, p. 195) explain, "A novelist may manifest himself/herself in his/her masterpiece," implying that writers often draw on personal experiences and real-world difficulties when writing their stories.

*Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam is an example of a work that addresses the theme of injustice. The story is based on Salaam's experience as a member of the Central Park Five, a group of five young men imprisoned for a crime they did not commit. The novel follows Amal Shahid, an African-American boy who experiences injustice in the legal system. The novel delves into racial inequality and an unjust criminal justice system. Yusef Salaam is very familiar with this story as he was part of the Central Park Five and was unjustly imprisoned as a teenager. Salaam's life experiences later inspired Amal's plot, highlighting the similarities between Amal's fate in the novel and Yusef Salaam's actual event. The work effectively portrays the psychological and emotional effects of false accusations, especially for young black men, by blending historical and poetic aspects. According to Simon Scott's conversation on *Weekend Edition Saturday and Up First* with Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam, the artists' partnership resulted in a socially relevant and narratively powerful work, with Zoboi using rhyme to tell his story. In addition, Salaam offers a perceptive point of view based on his personal experiences (Mayer, 2020).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on *Punching the Air* has generally focused on social and psychological themes. Chaima (2022), for example, analyzed institutional racism and healing through art with Critical Race Theory and Psychoanalytic Theory. However, these

studies must still address the intertextual relationship between the novel and Yusef Salaam's real-life experiences.

This research fills the gap by using Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality to examine how the novel adapts and transforms Salaam's narrative. This focus offers a new perspective on how literature reinterprets actual events to make them relevant to modern readers.

Intertextuality refers to how a text interacts with or refers to other texts, creating relationships that result in new understandings and perspectives. Each literary work does not stand alone but is always connected to previous works. As Kristeva (1986, p. 37) explains, texts are part of a 'mosaic of quotations' that constantly reinterprets existing ideas. In this context, when a novel adapts a true story, it changes the story and creates new meanings that are more relevant to contemporary experience.

Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of intertextuality in the 1960s and built on ideas from theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Ferdinand de Saussure. Kristeva emphasized that texts are always in conversation with other texts, where new works often quote, change, or provide new perspectives on old ones (Kristeva, 1986, p. 38). In this sense, intertextuality challenges the idea of originality and instead emphasizes the endless circulation and interaction of ideas between texts (Allen, 2011, p. 26). In Bennett and Royle's (2016, p. 24) view, intertextuality allows literary works to convey old messages in a way that feels closer and more meaningful to current readers. Thus, each adaptation or reference becomes an opportunity to renew understanding and reinterpret old ideas according to the needs of the times.

Adaptation is more than retelling a story; it is reshaping it to make it meaningful to the reader with a new context or format. According to Hutcheon & O'Flynn (2013, p. 8-9), adaptations allow writers to focus on themes related to the present. In *Punching the Air*, Amal's character serves as a fictional lens through which readers can understand Yusef Salaam's real-life experiences. The story indirectly conveys the emotional burden of systemic discrimination to the reader. Through Amal's story, the novel invites empathy, showing how racism and injustice continue to affect people's lives today.

While transformation goes a step further, transformation is about changing and reinterpreting the original narrative to create new meaning. Kristeva (1986, p. 39) emphasizes that old stories evolve into something more relevant to the current social context through transformation. In *Punching the Air*, Salaam's real-life experiences are

reflected upon and re-imagined by connecting past injustices to ongoing struggles. As Leitch (2017, p. 110) explains, this type of transformation encourages readers to engage with the past and the present.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Following Dawson's (2009) recommendation, a qualitative descriptive method was used to explain and describe the data comprehensively. This method was chosen because the study relies on the analysis of written text, which allows for a more in-depth understanding of the issues discussed. According to Creswell's (2007) guidelines, a qualitative approach facilitates further exploration of the research topic by focusing on the complexity of the narrative.

This research focuses on a comparative analysis of the novels *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam, which address actual events relating to the Central Park Jogger incident. The study explores how fictional narratives adapt and transform actual events through Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality. The subject of the study is the narrative of the book *Punching the Air*, which is compared with historical facts from Salaam's personal experiences and related documentation to reveal the interaction between fiction and history.

Text analysis is the primary tool in this research. In addition to essential documents from news reports, interviews, and other sources related to the Central Park Jogger case, critical passages from the novel were selected and carefully examined. To ensure validity and reliability, the research cross-referenced various sources, such as articles, interviews with Yusef Salaam, and news reports.

The study was conducted in stages. First, the researchers read the novel *Punching the Air* repeatedly to find issues such as injustice, racial discrimination, and systemic bias. Secondary sources, such as interviews with Salaam and media coverage of the Central Park Jogger, were also examined to understand the historical context better. Key events and characters are identified and compared with documented information about Salaam's experiences to understand how adaptation and transformation occur in the novel.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As part of the Central Park Five, *Punching the Air* tells the true story of Yusef Salaam. The novel introduces Amal, whose struggle is similar to Salaam's but with a stronger focus on finding himself through art. Amal's journey is further complicated by this shift from fact

to fiction. The novel transforms historical events into new stories through intertextuality and creative expression. This analysis uses information from news reports and Salaam's public statements. This study identified vital comparisons, which will be further explored in the following analysis.

## **Chronology of the Inciting Incident**

### ***Real Event***

Yusef Salaam, the author of *Punching the Air*, drew inspiration from his experience. The novel reflects Amal's story, influenced by an incident in 1989 when Salaam and four other teenagers, known as the Central Park Five, were wrongly charged with rape, assault, robbery, and rioting after a woman was found injured while jogging in Central Park, New York.

*"McCray, Salaam and Santana were found guilty of rape, assault, robbery and riot."*  
(Editors, 2019)

On the night of April 19, 1989, around 30 teenage boys entered Central Park in New York City, causing a disturbance. A young white woman jogging, Patricia "Trisha" Meili, was brutally attacked, leading to severe injuries, unconsciousness, and sexual assault. Discovered around 1:30 AM the next day, she had lost approximately 80% of her blood, resulting in a two-week coma and amnesia. Yusef Salaam and four other teenagers were arrested on charges related to the assault on Meili. In the two storylines above, Amal Shahid and Yusef Salaam are mistreated according to the law and have to be imprisoned for mistakes they never made.

### ***In the Novel***

In *Punching The Air*, Amal Shahid's character is convicted of attempted murder with a deadly weapon, which was later reduced to aggravated assault and battery with a deadly weapon. This is reflected in the chapter Counting Game in the verse.

*"One count of attempted murder with a deadly weapon.  
The prosecutor had to prove that I grabbed my skateboard and swung it at his head and tried to kill him ... The prosecutor had to prove that I grabbed my skateboard and swung it at his head when his DNA wasn't even on it so ... to one count of aggravated assault and battery."  
" (Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 48)*

The quote notes that Amal swung a skateboard at the victim, but no DNA evidence links him to the assault. Amal confesses to initiating the altercation but denies causing the severe injuries that left the victim in a coma.

*"What was I supposed to say? That I didn't do it, over and over again ...  
I didn't do it ..."*

*And I'm over here  
shouting to the judge, jury, cops, reporters  
his moms, my moms, that  
I threw the first punch but not the last—  
I didn't do it"*  
(Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 58)

### ***Discussion***

In the analysis based on Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, the researchers observe how Amal Shahid's story in *Punching the Air* adapts and transforms Yusef Salaam's real-life experience in the Central Park Jogger case. Amal faces punishment for an attack he does not commit, similar to how Salaam and four other teenagers are unjustly imprisoned for the rape and assault of a jogger in Central Park. Both stories highlight the legal injustices black teenagers experience, where physical evidence, such as DNA, fails to support the charges but is still used to convict them.

The researchers found that the transformation of the Central Park Five's historical events into fiction involves changing the crime's context. Salaam and his friends are charged with rape and assault, while in the novel, Amal is accused of attempted murder and assault with a skateboard. Although the contexts differ, both narratives emphasize the systemic injustice faced by African-American youth in a racially biased justice system. Amal serves as a symbolic version of Salaam, with his experiences and struggles reflecting the trauma and injustice Salaam endures in real life.

### **Racist Behavior Received**

#### ***Real Event***

Salaam and four of his friends were arrested and interrogated for a crime they did not commit. They were cornered into confessing to acts they never committed.

*"the police deprived us of food, drink or sleep for more than 24 hours," "Under duress, we falsely confessed. Though we were innocent, we spent our formative years in prison, branded as rapists."*  
(Editors, 2019)

This section demonstrates racism through the mistreatment of individuals, including Yusef Salaam, during their arrest. The police deprived them of their essential needs for over 24 hours, leading to false confessions under duress. Despite their innocence, they were labeled

as rapists, demonstrating systemic injustice and racial bias in law enforcement actions and legal processes.

### *In the Novel*

In the novel, the main character, Amal, faces the devastating treatment of racism. As an African-American teenager who is misidentified and convicted of a crime he did not commit, Amal faces systemic injustice. Some of the forms of racism he experiences include arbitrary searches by the authorities that led to his arrest, prejudice from many people, as well as racial discrimination within the criminal justice system.

*On the night of my arrest*

...  
*named Miranda told me my rights  
to remain silent to have an attorney  
that anything I say will be used against me  
I was silent and Umi got an attorney ...*  
(Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 85)

The night he was arrested on charges of maltreatment for a crime he did not commit and in the absence of any evidence pointing to him indicates arbitrariness on the part of the authorities concerned.

*There were more witnesses from East Hills ...  
And the college kid who recorded the whole thing ...*  
(Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 24)

Testimonies from people at the scene when the incident occurred put Amal on the spot in his trial. A student even filmed the incident, which became the most substantial evidence against him.

*and Ms. Rinaldi, my art teacher*

...  
*It was the first time  
she saw me*  
(Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 15)

Amal faces racism in a legal proceeding where Mrs. Rinaldi, his art teacher, becomes an incriminating witness, indicating potential unfair treatment influenced by racial bias. Mrs. Rinaldi's role underscores the impact of racism on Amal's narrative in the legal context. Amal also encounters rejection and stereotyping from society, contributing to profound psychological and social trauma and highlighting the harsh reality of enduring racial injustice.

### *Discussion*

Using Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, the researchers found that there is a significant transformation and adaptation of actual events into fictional narratives when

they analyze Amal's racist behavior in *Punching the Air* and relate it to Yusef Salaam's experience. Amal is portrayed as an African-American teenager who experiences racism throughout, from arrests to unfair trials. Racial prejudice affected the legal process, and Amal was arrested without solid evidence. Ms. Rinaldi, one of the main witnesses against Amal, spoke about how racial prejudice influences the perception of black people. This transformation was based on Yusef Salaam's experience when he was forced to confess to a crime he did not commit due to police pressure, which deprived him of his fundamental rights for over twenty-four hours. Systemic racism in both cases played a role in determining their legal fate, demonstrating deep-seated racial discrimination.

Intertextuality plays a role in how Amal's story adapts Salaam's experience by changing concrete details, such as the type of crime, but retaining the core experience of racial injustice. The novel transforms Salaam's experience into a broader story about racism in the legal system, illustrating how fictional characters like Amal experience oppression and discrimination similar to what Salaam experiences in real life.

## **Evidence Discovery and Acquittal**

### ***Real Event***

In 2002, Matias Reyes, serving a life sentence for murder, confessed to attacking Trisha Meili alone, providing precise details and DNA evidence matching the crime scene. Reyes assaulted Meili in Central Park, leading to a 33-year sentence added to his life term. In 2003, the Central Park Five were acquitted, receiving a financial settlement and filing a torture lawsuit against New York City. The case exemplifies the impact of racism and injustice on lives, emphasizing the crucial need for fair and objective criminal trials, irrespective of the accused's race or background.

### ***In the Novel***

Amal is not released from prison in the novel, but there is a bright spot where her mother has engaged a new lawyer named Tarana Hudson to defend the case.

*it was time  
for a new attorney  
(Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 375)*

Moreover, one of the bright spots that led to Amal's release was that the victim, Jeremy Mathis, had regained consciousness from his coma, allowing him to give his accurate account of what happened on that fateful night.

*Jeremy Mathis  
is ready to talk—*

(Zoboi & Salaam, 2020, p. 376)

Although the novel does not explain how Amal's story ends, readers are expected to interpret a good ending for Amal if Jeremy Mathis' character has woken up from his coma and can testify.

### ***Discussion***

In *Punching the Air*, Amal's story does not achieve full exoneration, but there is a bright spot with the emergence of a new lawyer, Tarana Hudson, who is expected to change his fate. On the other hand, the resurrection of the victim, Jeremy Mathis, who can testify, gives hope that the truth will finally be revealed. Although the ending of Amal's story is not certain, the novel leaves room for readers to interpret the potential of Amal's liberation, adapting the idea of a change of fate after years of injustice.

In real history, the release of Yusef Salaam and other members of the Central Park Five occurred after Matias Reyes confessed to being the real perpetrator of the crime in 2002, backed by DNA evidence that proved his guilt. This confession paved the way for the release of the teenagers who had been unjustly imprisoned. By applying Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, the researchers see that the novel does not simply retell historical events but transforms them into a fictional narrative with adaptation elements. In the novel, the recognition of the truth comes from the testimony of the conscious victim, while in real history, the recognition comes from the actual perpetrator.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study concluded that *Punching the Air* retells Yusef Salaam's story and transforms it into a moving and meaningful work of literature. This research shows the intertextuality relationship between *Punching the Air* and Yusef Salaam's true story from the chronology of events, discrimination, and liberation. With the character of Amal Shahid, Salaam's true story of injustice as part of the Central Park Five is combined with fictional elements. Therefore, the novel depicts a story of injustice and individual struggle, emphasizing the power of survival and systemic bias.

The novel uses intertextuality to bring together fictional and historical events, making it more relatable to today's readers. The essence of Salaam's story is adapted and transformed to the contemporary social context. Readers can gain an understanding and

awareness that the struggle against racial injustice still exists in history and modern life through this process.

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