

Navigating a Racially Charged Landscape: An Examination of Racism in Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Black Brother, Black Brother*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the representation of racism and its psychological and social impact on the protagonist in Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Black Brother, Black Brother*. The protagonist of the novel, Donte Ellison, is twelve years old, and faces systemic racism, discrimination, and biases of color and ethnocentric institutional settings. Employing qualitative literary analysis and critical content analysis, the study explores how microaggressions, institutional discrimination, and the criminalization of Black identity shape Donte's sense of self and belonging. The other aim of the paper is to study how the intersectionality of class, and race, and the power of institutions, and the authority of institutions, aggravates the marginalization of the protagonist. By incorporating theoretical insights from racial studies and sociological perspectives, the research highlights the psychological burden of visibility and the internalization of racial hierarchies. Importantly, the study also underscores resilience as a counter-narrative, demonstrating how Donte reclaims identity and agency through sport, mentorship, and familial support. The paper argues that the novel not only critiques systemic racism but also offers a transformative model of resistance and self-affirmation. This study is concerned with the contemporary relevance of the novel, with literature on race, identity, and empowerment of the youth, in the socio-cultural and educational settings.

Keywords: racism, colorism, microaggressions, systemic oppression, identity, black youth

Introduction

Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Black Brother, Black Brother* is a contemporary bildungsroman that explores race, identity, and belonging through the lived experiences of a young Black boy navigating a racially charged environment. It offers a poignant exploration of race relations through the lens of twelve-year-old Donte Davis Ellison. Set within the seemingly progressive environment of a predominantly white private school, Middlefield Prep, the narrative unveils the pervasive reality of racism, particularly the insidious racial prejudice and how it psychologically impacts a multi-racial family. Though it explores themes of racial identity,

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prejudice, and personal growth within a private school setting, it delves deeper into racial discrimination.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on how children's literature engages with complex socio-political issues such as racism and identity formation. While often perceived as a genre of moral instruction, contemporary children's fiction increasingly serves as a critical site for examining structural inequalities. This paper addresses the central research problem: **how does the novel represent racism at individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels, and how does the protagonist respond to these pressures?**

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To analyse representations of racism and microaggressions
2. To examine the role of colorism and identity conflict
3. To explore systemic racism and institutional bias
4. To highlight resilience and identity reconstruction

The paper is structured into thematic sections: literature-informed conceptualization of racism, analysis of microaggressions, systemic discrimination, identity formation, and resilience, followed by a conclusion.

Literature Review

Scholars such as Derald Wing Sue et al. conceptualize microaggressions as everyday forms of subtle racism that cumulatively impact psychological well-being. Margaret Hunter's work on colorism highlights intra-racial hierarchies privileging lighter skin tones. Dovidio and Gaertner's theory of aversive racism explains implicit biases in liberal institutional spaces. Further, studies such as Hinton et al. (Vera Institute) emphasize systemic inequalities in the criminal justice system, particularly the overrepresentation of Black youth. Lori Tharps' work on multiracial families sheds light on identity tensions within racially diverse households. This study builds upon these frameworks to analyse the novel as a reflection of both lived experience and structural inequality.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis and critical content analysis of Jewell Parker Rhodes' novel *Black Brother, Black Brother*. The methodology is designed to explore the racism presented in the novel against the backdrop of high school environment tinged with the sports events. The primary text is examined alongside secondary scholarly sources to interpret themes of racism, identity, and resistance. The approach is interpretative, focusing on narrative, character development, and thematic patterns.

Discussion

Racism

Racism is an umbrella word which denotes the belief that one race is superior to another and

can manifest in discriminatory or prejudiced actions towards individuals of a different race and ethnicity. It is a form of systemic oppression that has deep roots in history and continues to impact societies worldwide. Recent discrimination based on nationality too can be added under racism, as pointed out in the report A/HRC/38/52 of HRC of UN published on 25th April 2018. (Achiume 11-12)

The Burden of Visibility: Racism and Microaggressions

From the novel's opening lines, Donte grapples with the hyper-visibility of his blackness. Yearning for invisibility, he declares, "I wish I were invisible... it wouldn't matter to me. I'd be gone. Disappeared." (Rhodes 3) This longing stems from the constant microaggressions he faces at Middlefield Prep. As defined by Peoples' Journal of Leviathan, microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al. 279). Donte personally goes through this situation when his classmates tease and exclude him. The continuous mockery from the school bully, Alan, with the phrase "Black Brother, Black Brother", clearly shows a microaggression that emphasizes Donte's sense of being different in a white environment. Alan isolates him because of his color,

"Black brother. Black brother." My new nickname. The whole school seemed to whisper it. Or else thought it. Funny, how with two words, Alan made it easier for kids to exclude me. If I sat in the cafeteria, students moved. No one invited me to a study group. Or offered to be friends. No one even wanted to talk with me. (Rhodes 13–14)

Research conducted by Sue et al. (279) underscores the lasting impact of microaggressions, illustrating how they can result in feelings of isolation, frustration and self-doubt. Likewise, Donte finds himself vigilant, second questioning his every move and fearing being judged solely by his skin color. At school, teachers compare Donte with his white brother Trey and presuppose that he gets into trouble advertently, "How come he gets in so much trouble? Why can't he be good like his brother? Helpful? Obedient... Be invisible. My insides burn. Anger builds. (Rhodes 4). Even his headmaster has the same presupposition, "... The headmaster waves her away, then sighs. "Why can't you be more like your brother?" (Rhodes 8–9). While in prison, he recollects how he felt normal in his old school and contrasts it with his new school, where he meets with browbeating,

"I hate this school," I say softly, slowly... "Hate no matter what goes wrong, I'm at fault..." Everybody here bullies me. Teachers. Students. Whispers, sometimes outright shouts, follow me. Seems like everybody has something bad to say..." Girls laugh and point at me. "Why can't you be like your brother?" "Can your brother find you in the dark?" I breathe. "It hurts. All of it." (Rhodes 6-7).

This kind of continual hectoring incidents cause despair in Donte and make him yearn for invisibility, "I'm not invisible. Worst time ever not to have a superpower. (Rhodes 10) Even at Middlefield Prep, they like Trey. Why not me? ... Disappear. Be invisible. Shame overwhelms me." (Rhodes 19) He envisages the mistreatment of people at Middlefield Prep, "Black brother

is all Middlefield Prep can see. Then there's me. Skin color is just a part of me." (Rhodes 34). Recurrent bullying by some of his peers and preconceptions of teachers and officials make Donte's life at school hard. We can realize this from his thinking, "I shake my head. Bullies, prejudiced, ignorant people make life hard. Alan's all three: a prejudiced, ignorant bully." (Rhodes 119) He speaks about the trait of infectiousness of Alan, who fabricates racial prejudice on Donte and effectuates others to believe it, "Because what Alan thinks, he makes other people think, too. So, I'm suspended. Going to before a judge. Middlefield says I'm delinquent. (Rhodes 39) and he conveys his situation of being not able to retaliate against Alan to Trey, "Wish I could sue Alan. Sue all prejudiced people." (Rhodes 39) The everlasting effect of the unfairness done by Alan is felt by Donte just before the start of the competition, "Still, Alan's racism is like an echo in my bones, mind and blood. Another unfairness. (Rhodes 212)

The Constant Comparison

The presence of Donte's brother, Trey, who appears white, further accentuates the sting of Donte's racial identity. Trey readily integrates into the school's social fabric, a stark contrast to Donte's struggles. Donte thinks about it while he is under suspension, "Trey goes to school... He has no trouble making friends." (Rhodes 30) He revisits the experience of how he was treated in his previous town, and he skepticizes the affability of his past neighbours,

"In New York, I had plenty friends. In Newton, everybody's suspicious of me... Friends in New York liked me... But maybe they didn't have a choice? I was Trey's little brother... Everybody liked Trey. Even at Middlefield Prep, they like Trey. Why not me? Disappear. Be invisible. Shame overwhelms me." (Rhodes 18-19)

This dynamic introduces the concept of colorism, a form of prejudice within racial groups that privileges lighter skin tones. Research by Hunter suggests that colorism can have a detrimental impact on self-esteem and mental health, particularly for darker-skinned individuals. This internalized racism, as described by Dovidio and Gaertner, contributes to a sense of self-hatred and a yearning to conform to dominant beauty standards. Donte hates his new school and hates himself for he is racially bullied. "I hate, hate this school. Hate our family moved. Hate how people treat me. A murmur, then a roar: "I hate being me." (Rhodes 9)

Continuous bullying and being sent to prison make Donte pessimistic and frightened.

"Despite Mom's skill, despite what she and dad believe, I don't think I am going to win. I feel like I'm going to lose. I'm lost." (Rhodes 29)

"I start shivering, trembling all at once. Shivering because of the cold, trembling because of my mixed-up feelings. Black brother, black brother. I turn, thinking someone is taunting me. The street is quiet. Not even a person." (Rhodes 33)

In many instances, people ask Donte directly about having a white brother and the possibility of their brotherhood,

"Trey's skin is like Dad's; mine is like Mom's. Brothers. Students at Middlefield Prep think we're funny. "How can you be brothers?". But it's Alan who punishes, who makes me being darker than a crime. Despairing, I gently close my bedroom door." (Rhodes 44)

"Jamil, one of the third graders, points at Trey, asking, "How come you're white? And he's not? Is Donte adopted?" "Nope. We're biracial. Our mom's black. Our dad's white." ... "Oh," Jamil says proudly, figuring it out. Brothers. Just different colors." (Rhodes 153-154)

Donte feels alleviated when he sees many dark-skinned people like him on his journey to Boston and in the Boston where he goes to for the training of fencing, "I go from being worried, on guard, to feeling ease as more people's skin resembles mine." (Rhodes 57) Similarly, he is alleviated to see more black kids at his training centre, "In the suburbs, most folks look like Dad and Trey. Here, most kids look like me. At least, color-wise." (Rhodes 153) Concentrating on fencing and seeing many dark people at the training centre make Donte reposed and confident.

Systemic Racism and the Criminalization of Blackness

The narrative extends beyond the schoolyard, exposing Donte to the harsh realities of racial prejudice and systemic racism as he is suspended from school, imprisoned and made to appear in court. Donte's mom is rattled by the racial discrimination and systemic racism of staff at school and police, "School-to-prison pipeline. This is how it starts. Arresting kids of color. How come they didn't call us? Why didn't the principal call?" (Rhodes 23) and she enumerates the incidents relating to criminalization of blackness,

"Police before parents. Unbelievable." ... This is how it starts. Bias. Racism. Plain and simple. Philadelphia, cops called on black men meeting in Starbucks. Portland, cops called on a hotel guest talking on his cell phone with his mother. That's not the worst of it, Cleveland, Tamir Rice playing with a toy gun, killed. Twelve and he's dead. Boys. Men. It's everywhere. Everywhere. Panic, grief. (Rhodes 24).

Even the judge had the prejudice that Donte must be from an all-black and low-income family,

"... The judge, tall and white, looks like a preacher in his dark robes... (Rhodes 138) The judge's bro furrows. "You go to a private school?" "Yes, sir."

"Scholarship?"

"No, sir," snaps Lawyer Mom. The judge's face is unreadable, his fingers quickly tap-tap next to his gavel... Mom said juvenile judges have lots of discretion. ... I see it. Plainly see it. I'm not who the judge expected me to be. And that's my advantage. It's harder to stereotype me... Mom's lips thin. I see her thinking: Easy to stereotype kids of color. Especially easier to stereotype poor kids of color. Unfair bias... Lady Justice is blind. But it mattered to the judge that he could see I wasn't poor, see I had a coach, and educated parents. A white dad, a white-skinned brother. (Rhodes 140-146).

This is a situation which perfectly matches the opinion voiced by Thorps, "... Americans do not have a language or framework with which to understand a child who is lighter than her mother, or a father who is darker than his son... people expect families to match, despite the fact that interracial marriage has been legal in all fifty states..." (Tharps 7)

In court, Donte witnesses the systemic racism and criminalization of blackness, where he realises that most of the juvenile delinquents are of his color and from economically backward situations,

"The majority of "delinquents" are my color-just some lighter, some darker. There are girls in skirts, dresses and leggings. Most are boys wearing jeans and T-shirts or khakis and polos. I'm the only one in a suit. Like I'm ready for church. Or graduation. Languages - Spanish, Yoruba, Swahili, Portuguese - and accents - Jamaican, New England, Southern, even Brooklyn - echo off the marble floor, walls." (Rhodes 135)

These incidents reflect the claim made by Vera, an organisation voicing against mass incarceration, which reveals how Black individuals are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement and the criminal justice system. (Hinton et al.) Donte's fear and confusion mirror the real-world experiences of many Black youths who navigate a world where their race makes them inherently suspect. Book reviewer Sophie also believes that Rhodes has touched on the issue of systemic racism in the story, "Rhodes mentions ... along with systemic racism and the school-to-prison pipeline." (Sophie).

Finding Strength and Identity Through Resilience

Despite the constant barrage of racist microaggressions and experiences of doubting his fitting into his family due to his color, Donte demonstrates remarkable resilience. He finds solace and strength in fencing, a sport associated with aristocracy and white, as claimed by his coach, "Fencing has aristocratic roots. But you belong here. We all do." ... In this arena, fencing seems like a white sport. But that can't be true everywhere, can it?" (Rhodes 160-161)

"Why around here are fences mainly white?" asks Trey. Coach answers, "Racial bias. But class bias, too. Public schools don't offer fencing. Private schools do. Like lacrosse, Trey and me never knew the sport existed until we started private school. Yeah, like water polo, too." Trey nods. (Rhodes 203-204)

Donte decides to confront his annoyer through the sport of fencing, in which his oppressor, Alan, has excellence and is a champion. Trey, Donte's brother, helps him to find the coach, Arden Jones and motivates him to take on Alan in the strip,

"I can't prove myself to the whole world. But I can take on Alan. Stop his disrespect. Show him he won't defeat me. He's not better than me."

"Only thing Alan really cares about is fencing."

"Captain of the state championship team."

"That's right." He gulps milk from the carton. "It's his whole life."

"Then I'll learn fencing." Trey chokes. "What?"

"I'll learn fencing."

I can't beat the whole world, but I can beat Alan. I know I can. Just got to find another way. (Rhodes 36-43)

After consulting with his brother and deciding to get trained under coach Arden Jones for fencing, Donte gets confidence and boasts to himself, "My hero. Donte Ellison, Fencer Extraordinaire." (Rhodes 51) "I'll defend myself against Alan. (Rhodes 79) His parents are happy to see their son deciding to face his bully positively, "Mom, Dad, Trey laugh. Happy I've found a sport." (Rhodes 120). The peculiarity of fencing is that the audience could not see the faces of players and identify them. "You can't tell who's who. Who's white. Who's black. Just two fencers trying to score." (Rhodes 213) Donte describes his win against his nagger Alan,

"Big finish. I grunt, the dam bursts, all my hurt and anger rushes through my body then narrows into a fluid, focused hit. Score. Five to one, I win!... Walking toward Alan, I tug my gloves off. Extend my left, unswollen hand. Alan won't look at me... Funny, seeing our palms and fingers entwined, I could be clasping Dad's or Trey's hand. Black on white. White on black. Alan tries to pull his hand back. I grip harder. (Look at me.) Alan's head lifts. "Congratulations." ... He can even dislike me if he wants. But now he has to see ME. (Rhodes 226-228)

By defeating his bully Alan, Donte becomes confident, crushes the white supremacy of Alan and the Middlefield Prep and proves his identity to society, "I know who I am - Donte Ellison, son of William and Denise Ellison, brother of Trey Ellison. Arden Jones's student; Zion and Zarra's teammate. Me. Everyone in the arena sees me. Fencing champion. I raise my foil with unshakable, unmistakable confidence." (Rhodes 228)

By excelling in fencing, Donte reclaims his power and challenges the stereotypes associated with black masculinity. Richard Majors highlights the role of sports in empowering young black men and fostering positive self-identity. Furthermore, Donte's connection with his mentor, Coach Arden Jones, a successful black fencer, provides him with a role model who shatters racial barriers in the sport. This mentorship program signifies the importance of positive black representation, as emphasized by Wright et al., in fostering self-confidence, resilience and promoting academic achievement in black youth.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Black Brother, Black Brother* offers a nuanced and multi-layered portrayal of racism, encompassing microaggressions, colorism, and systemic discrimination. Through Donte's experiences, the novel reveals how racial bias operates not only through overt acts but also through subtle, institutionalized practices that shape identity and belonging. The psychological impact of such experiences is evident in Donte's initial alienation, self-doubt, and desire for invisibility. However, the narrative ultimately shifts toward empowerment, illustrating the transformative potential of resilience, mentorship, and supportive familial relationships as affirmed by Greg Dimitriadis in his introduction to the book *Black Youth Matters: Transitions from School to Success*. (Wright et al. vii-ix)

The novel's depiction of the school-to-prison pipeline and racial profiling aligns with contemporary socio-political realities, reinforcing its relevance beyond literary analysis. As observed by Tharps L. Lori "From the minor aggravation of being stared at in public to the very real fear of having your most valued relationships challenged by those in power, being a

family of different colors can produce a never-ending roller coaster ride of trial and tribulations", Donte experiences a roller coaster ride of extended racial derisions and experiences of doubting his brotherhood with his white brother due to his multi-racial family.

This research underscores the importance of incorporating such texts into academic and pedagogical discussions on race and identity. Future research may explore comparative analyses with other young adult texts addressing systemic racism or examine the role of sports narratives in identity formation.

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