

A Racial Injustice in Nic Stone's Dear Martin

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A Racial Injustice in Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*

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Abstract. This thesis is entitled A Racial of Injustice in Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*. The study analyzes how racial injustice is depicted through the narrative structure of the novel. The study aims to describe the narrative structure of racial injustice, identify forms of systemic racism, and analyze their impact on the main character, Justyce McAllister. The data are taken from the novel as the primary source. The study employs a qualitative research method with a narrative analysis approach. Because the issue relates to structural social problems, the researcher applies Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory and Joe Feagin's systemic racism theory. The results show that the narrative follows five stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, an attempt to repair, and a new equilibrium. The study also reveals three forms of systemic racism: structural, institutional, and cultural. These forms of racism are embedded in education, law enforcement, the media, and social perceptions. Justyce experiences emotional trauma, an identity crisis, and social alienation due to racism. Despite facing discrimination, Justyce rebuilds his identity and resilience by reflecting on his experiences through letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In the end, the novel portrays how racism affects every aspect of life and identity and demonstrates how narrative can be used to critique and challenge social injustice.

Keywords : racial injustice, narrative structure, systemic racism, structural racism, institutional racism

INTRODUCTION

Racism is a form of injustice that results from beliefs and systems which position certain racial groups as superior to others. This ideology often manifests in both individual actions and institutional practices, creating long-term discrimination and inequality across legal, educational, and social domains (Feagin, 2014). Racism is not only about overt prejudice but also about systemic structures that perpetuate unequal treatment and limited access to opportunities for marginalized communities. Systemic racism, as defined by Joe Feagin (2014), refers to deeply embedded discriminatory practices within institutions that consistently disadvantage racial minority groups. These practices operate through structural mechanisms such as legal policy, school systems, and economic disparity and are reinforced by cultural narratives and societal norms.

Literary works often serve as critical reflections of such social realities. One such work is *Dear Martin* (2017) by Nic Stone, which portrays the journey of Justyce McAllister, a Black teenager contending with systemic discrimination in contemporary America. Despite being academically accomplished and morally upright, Justyce faces multiple layers of injustice including racial profiling, biased media narratives, and prejudiced treatment from peers and institutions. Through the lens of narrative theory and racial discourse, the novel sheds light on how racism infiltrates not just individual lives but entire systems of power and identity.

This study applies Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory, which divides narrative progression into five stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, attempt to repair, and new equilibrium. This structure allows an examination of how the novel plot mirrors Justyce transformation as he encounters and resists systemic injustice. Simultaneously, Feagin's systemic racism theory is employed to identify the forms of racism structural, institutional, and cultural, that influence Justyce identity and emotional development.

The selection of *Dear Martin* as the subject of study is based on the novel's vivid depiction of racial injustice that continues to resonate in today's society. The novel not only presents the harsh realities of racism, but also emphasizes the psychological and emotional impacts it has on Black youth. Furthermore, the protagonist's attempt to understand his experiences through writing letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. serves as a powerful literary device to express inner turmoil and resilience. This research focuses on two objectives: first, to identify and describe the narrative structure of racial injustice presented in *Dear Martin* and second, to analyze the forms and impact of systemic racism experienced by the main character. By combining narrative analysis with sociological theory, this study aims to reveal how literature can serve as a medium to critique and challenge the continuing presence of racism in modern society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sociology of literature is a theoretical approach that views literary texts as both artistic products and social documents that reflect the realities and structures within a given society. This approach aims to understand how literature not only presents individual experiences but also communicates the broader social dynamics such as inequality, conflict, and systemic injustice. In this context, literature becomes a medium through which societal issues such as racism can be examined, critiqued, and interpreted.

According to Supsiadi (2011:38) One of the views of genetic structuralism is that there are parallels between the structure of literary works and the social structure of society. This concept supports the idea that the five-stage narrative structure in *Dear Martin* also mirrors the social reality of racial injustice experienced by Black Americans. This aligns with the concept of genetic structuralism, which suggests that a literary work mirrors the ideological and structural realities of the society from which it emerges. Similarly, Adepati (2018:441) notes that narrative structures such as equilibrium, disruption, and resolution can be analyzed as reflections of real-world sociopolitical changes, particularly when literature aims to challenge dominant power structures.

In analyzing *Dear Martin*, this study employs Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory, which outlines a five-stage framework of storytelling: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, attempt to repair, and new equilibrium (Todorov, 1977:111). This structure allows for a systematic exploration of how a story evolves and how the characters undergo transformation in response to conflicts. Through this model, Justyce McAllister's journey from innocence to awareness and resilience in the face of racial oppression is systematically mapped.

Narrative theory, this research applies Joe Feagin's systemic racism theory, which positions racism as a deeply entrenched system within the legal, educational, and cultural institutions of society. Feagin (2014:1) asserts that racism is not merely the result of individual bias, but a pervasive system that consistently benefits dominant racial group particularly white Americans while disadvantaging minorities. According to Feagin, systemic racism includes several interrelated forms: structural, institutional, and cultural racism.

1. **Structural Racism:** Structural Racism refers to how laws, policies and social practices are designed in such a way that they benefit majority groups and disadvantage minority groups. In the context of the novel *Dear Martin*, Justyce McAllister experiences racial profiling when the police detain him for no apparent reason. the legal system in the novel shows prejudice against black men, who are often perceived as a threat before getting a chance to defend themselves. According to Feagin (2014:26), the American legal system has long treated black people with structural injustice, which is seen in various cases of racism in the real world.
2. **Institutional Racism:** Institutional Racism refers to policies and practices within institutions such as schools, police, and media that systematically discriminate against minority groups. For examples at school, Justyce faces discrimination from his teachers and peers, who question how he can be accepted to Yale. Feagin explains that educational institutions often maintain racial prejudice by ignoring or normalizing discrimination against minority students. (Feagin, J.R, 2014: 51).
3. **Cultural Racism:** Cultural racism is a form of racism that permeates culture and media. It creates and maintains negative stereotypes about certain racial groups. This kind of racism is different from obvious discrimination. It's more hidden. It's in the stories *they* watch, the news *they* read, and the songs *they* listen to every day. Media and popular culture often show minority groups, especially black people, in a negative way. They often show black people as criminals, lazy, or a threat to society. These images are more than just stories they influence how people thinks, feel, and act toward one another.

METHOD

This research uses a structuralism approaches and sociological approaches because the novel *Dear Martin* discusses racial injustice in society. The structuralism approach uses Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory to analyze the story through five stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, attempt to repair, and new equilibrium. The sociological approach applies Joe Feagin's theory of systemic racism to identify structural, institutional, and cultural racism. This approach helps to understand how the novel reflects real-world racial discrimination (Feagin, 2014:29). The research design is descriptive qualitative because it aims to describe the facts, experiences, and situations related to the character's struggle. According to Creswell (2018:46), qualitative research allows the researcher to stay close to the data, using minimal interpretation and thematic classification.

The primary data source is the novel *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, published in 2017, consisting of 159 pages. The data are in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and dialogues that show elements of narrative structure and racism. The data are collected by reading the novel thoroughly, identifying relevant passages, underlining and classifying

them based on Todorov's narrative stages and systemic racism theory by Joe Feagin. After collecting the data, the analysis is conducted by interpreting the selected text according to the theoretical framework and drawing conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study analyze *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone through the lens of systemic racism and Tzvetan Todorov five stage narrative structure. It focuses on two types of racism structural, institutional and cultural racism and how the main character, Justyce McAllister, struggles against them. The narrative structure helps to trace the psychological and social transformation of justice as he confronts racial injustice.

Equilibrium

This section describes and analyzes the forms of structural racism in Justyce early life in Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*. In this section, it describes how Justyce McAllister is a bright and accomplished black student at an elite high school and lives in a stable environment, in reality he is part of an unequal social system. Although Justyce has good academic opportunities, he is one of only a few minorities at his school, which has only eight black students in total. This is a visible imbalance in the representation of racial injustice in his school. Justyce is only one of eight black students in the school environment, as describes in the quote.

¹⁰ "Have you not noticed there are only eight Black kids in our whole school?" (Stone, 2017:21).

The quote above shows that the elite education system in the United States is far from inclusive, especially when it comes to race. The small number of black students illustrates the structural barriers that make it difficult for them to access this type of school environment, even those with high ability and potential. The presence of equity in school is not a reflection of a fair or equal system, but rather shows that equity is the exception, not the rule, to the success of black students in the education system.

Disruption

In this stage, the disruption stage refers to when the initial equilibrium is disrupted by an event that changes the course of the narrative. In Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*, this stage begins with Justyce's arrest by officer Castillo. Justyce tries to do a good deed to help his drunk ex-girlfriend Melo Taylor, but Justyce is treated like a criminal by officer Castillo. This illustrates how a black teenager's good intentions can be completely ignored because of racial prejudice.

¹ "Don't you say shit to me, you son of a bitch. I knew your punk ass was up to no good when I saw you walking down the road with that goddamn hood on." (Stone, 2017:9).

The quote above shows how Justyce's appearance and racial injustice immediately trigger suspicion and aggressive treatment from authorities, without any attempt to understand the true context. This event is a big change in the story. It makes Justyce realize that his grades and achievements in school do not keep him safe from the problems caused by the way the whole society works. This is a clear form of institutional racism, where state institutions such as the police force treat citizens with different standards based on race.

Recognition

In this stage, recognition in Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* represents an important phase in the development of the consciousness of the main character, Justyce McAllister. This is the point at which Justyce begins to consciously recognize and understand that racial injustice is not just an isolated incident, but part of a larger social and legal system that has long oppressed the black community in the United States. Justyce awareness begins with the case of Shemar Carson, a black teenager who is shot dead by the police despite being unarmed. Justyce emotional reaction and critical thinking toward the outcome of the trial-where the police officer was not convicted-demonstrated a shift in his perspective. He begins to realize that the legal system tends to favor white people and fails to protect black people, especially young men.

1 “All the courts “proved” yesterday was that a white guy can kill an unarmed teenager and get away with it if the kid is black.” (Stone, 2017:22).

The quote above illustrates the cynicism that arises from seeing inconsistency and injustice. Justyce sense of justice is shattered when he witnesses how the law is used to perpetuate racial violence. Justyce realization deepens when the media begins to frame him in a way that distorts reality.

Attempt to Repair

In this attempt to repair stage, Justyce begins to rebuild his understanding of identity, self-worth and his role in fighting for justice. However, this process is not easy as Justyce has to face rejection from his social environment. During a Halloween party, his friend named Blake wore a Ku Klux Klan costume - a symbol of hatred and terror towards the black community.

3 “Blake takes it too far. He’s dressed as a Klansman. He’s got on the white robe with the circular red and white cross patch on the chest, and he even has the pointed hood with the eyeholes cut out. If Justyce didn’t know it was a costume, he’d be a little scared”. (Stone, 2017:31).

In the quotation above the researcher can read that Blake is in the actions of wearing Ku Klux Klan clothing as a Halloween party costume, reflecting a lack of awareness about the history of racial violence in the United States. The Ku Klux Klan is a symbol of terror for the black community, which since the late 19th century has been involved in various acts of arson, torture and murder. When this symbol is joked about by white individuals like Blake, it illustrates the failure of the historical education system and the low social awareness of the majority group. This phenomenon also shows how forms of symbolic violence can operate through humor or entertainment, but still have a traumatic effects on the victim. Such actions show how racial injustice does not only occur in the forms of explicit violence, but also through the normalization of everyday social practices that trivialize the historical trauma experienced by marginalized groups.

New Equilibrium

This section explains and analyzes the forms of final the stage in Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* narrative depicts the bitter reality that academic success does not free one from the burden of racial stereotypes. Justyce is the main character who success entered one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the United States, Yale University.

However, instead of being accepted as an intelligent and accomplished individual, Justyce is still treated based on prejudices attached to his racial identity and past experiences. This becomes evident when Justyce introduces SJ, his white girlfriend, to his roommate at Yale. Instead of accepting the relationship with an open attitude, his roommate shows a negative change in attitude after learning that Justyce was once arrested by the police.

¹⁴ “In one of his letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Justyce wrote about his experience with racial prejudice on campus: After introducing SJ as his girlfriend, dude’s entire demeanor changed for the negative.” (Stone, 2017:151).

This quote highlights how Justyce’s background is used for judging his character by others, despite all his achievement. Instead of being seen as a bright Yale student or a young man with ambition, Justyce is reduced to “a black kid who got arrested.” This response reflects how strong and lasting the social stigma against black people is, even in environments that are considered educated and progressive. Yale, as a symbol of “the gateway to success,” is not free from racial prejudice, shows that discrimination is not just a street issue, but also lives in elite spaces that are supposed to be inclusive.

Structural Racism

Structural racism creates a stratified social order by distributing resources, power, and privilege in ways that perpetuate racial hierarchies. Racial injustice is a systemic issue that perpetuates discriminatory treatment against black individuals, despite their high moral and social standards, through policies, procedures, and social values. Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin*, Justyce McAllister is depicted as an outstanding student with high integrity. He studies at an elite school, watches his behaviour and strives to be a model citizen. Despite Justyce m¹⁰ achievements, it wasn’t enough to prevent him from being a victim of discrimination. When he tried to help his drunk ex-girlfriend, the police arrested him and treated him because of his black s²¹. This incident made Justyce question the social reality he had believed in. In a letter he writes to Martin Luther King Jr. he poured out his disappointment:

⁴ “Yeah, I grew up in a rough area, but I know I’m a good dude, Martin. I thought if I made sure to be an upstanding member of society, I’d be exempt from the stuff THOSE black guys deal with, you know? Really hard to swallow that I was wrong”. (Stone, 2017:12).

This quote describes the identity crisis Justyce experiences. Justyce thought believing that if he followed the rules and was a good person, he would be respected and treated fairly. Justyce is not seen as a person based on his personal qualities, but is generalized with negative stereotypes of black men.

Institution Racism

This section describes and analyse institutional racism. Institutional racism arises from the policies and practices of official institutions such as the police, legal system and education that systemically result in unequal treatment based on race. According to Feagin and Ducey (2018:70). In Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin*, this forms of injustice is clearly illustrated through Justyce,s traumatic experience when she was arrested by the police while trying to help her drunken ex-girlsfriend:

2 “Melo’s drunk beyond belief in the backseat of a car she fully intended to drive, yet Jus is the one in handcuffs. The cop squats and gets right in Justyce face. I know your kind: punks like you wander the streets of nice neighborhoods searching for prey. Just couldn’t resist the pretty white girl who’d locked her keys in her car, could ya?” (Stone, 2017:9)

The quotes above shows that Justyce is not judged based on his actions or intentions, but rather on his racial identity as a black teenager. Although he did not commit any violations, Justyce tried to help others. but he was still the target of physical violence from the police. These actions reflect racist assumptions embedded in law enforcement practices, where a black man is often associated with violence or criminality.

Cultural Racism

In this section describes and analyze cultural racism in the novel Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*. Cultural racism is a form of discrimination that is not directly visible, but is very influential because it works through the media of social norms, language, symbols, stereotypes, and representations. These elements serve to strengthen the dominance of white culture while ensuring and marginalizing black culture. Therefore, the dominant culture creates and spreads the view that black identity is problematic, or dangerous. In the novel *Dear Martin*, this form of cultural racism is very visible in the internalization process experienced by Justyce. Although he excels academically and tries to live according to the rules of society, Justyce still feels trapped in the negative image that sticks to him as a black man. This is clearly illustrated when he begins to extract his own self-worth due to the pressure of stereotypes from his surroundings.

6 “Me: What if Trey is right? What if, no matter what I do, the only thing white people will ever see me as is a nig—an “n-word”? (Stone, 2017, :36).

The quote above reflects the impact of internalize cultural racism when someone who is the target of discrimination begins to accept, believe, or at least consider the negative stereotypes directed at them. This condition is the result of the dominance of a racist culture that has been deeply rooted in society and consistently spreads narratives that disempower minority groups. In Justyce’s case, he begins to doubt that his good behavior, intelligence, or positive intentions could change the way white society viewed him, this is a form of racial injustice.

The Impact of Racism on Justyce McAllister

Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* shows how unfair the system can be. It also shows how difficult it is to deal with these issues and it changes Justyce McAllister's life. Justyce life changes a lot after he goes through some difficult experiences that are related to race. He goes from being a happy college student to feeling disappointed and depressed. He also starts to feel alone. These effects of racism in *Dear Martin* are not only physical but also emotional, intellectual, and relational.

The first and most traumatic event occurs when Justyce is wrongfully arrested and violently assaulted by officer Castillo while trying to help his drunk ex-girlfriend, Melo. Although, she acted in moral and responsible way, people immediately suspected her because of her race. According to Lazarido (2022:176), Structural racism and

institutional racism result in experiences of rejection and emotional alienation in public spaces for Black people and People of Color.

⁵ “Before he can get his head out of the car, he feels a tug on his shirt and is yanked backward. His head smacks the doorframe just before a hand clamps down on the back of his neck.” (Stone, 2017:9).

The quote above shows that this moment was a turning point that triggered an identity crisis. In his letter to Dr. King, Justyce started to wonder if being a model minority was enough to avoid racial discrimination.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this analysis of *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone reveals that the novel portrays three main forms of systemic racism based on Joe Feagin’s theory: structural racism, institutional racism, and cultural racism. Structural racism is reflected in educational and social systems that appear neutral but systematically disadvantage Black individuals. Justyce, despite being an intelligent student at an elite school, is still subjected to unfair treatment. Institutional racism is evident in how authorities like the police and the legal system treat Black people unjustly. Justyce is wrongfully arrested, and his friend Manny is killed by a police officer who faces no consequences. Cultural racism appears through stereotypes, media representation, and daily interactions, all of which reinforce societal bias and cause Justyce to struggle with his identity.

Using Tzvetan Todorov’s narrative theory, the story follows five stages: In the equilibrium stage, Justyce seems to live a stable life as a high-achieving student. The disruption occurs when he is unjustly arrested, exposing deep-rooted racial bias. The recognition stage follows as Justyce becomes aware that these injustices are systemic. In the attempt to repair, he tries to rebuild himself and cope with the prejudice he faces, although his efforts are often undermined by the racism around him. In the new equilibrium, Justyce realizes that academic success does not shield him from racial stigma, and true strength lies in resilience and courage against injustice.

Racism has a profound impact on Justyce’s emotions, thoughts, relationships, and self-identity. His experiences of unjust treatment cause emotional pain and lead him to question long-held beliefs about justice, merit, and equality. He feels disconnected from his environment and conflicted about his place in society. However, through his letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Justyce gains clarity and purpose, ultimately choosing to use his personal experiences to better understand and confront the racism he faces.

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