

JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Racial Slurs and Prejudicial Language Across Time: A Comparative Analysis of 12 Years a Slave and The Hate U Give

Nur Zukrina Binti Abu Hassan^{1*}

¹Faculty of Business, Multimedia University, Ayer Keroh, Malacca, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: Nur.zukrina.abu@student.mmu.edu.my; ORCID iD: 0009-0007-8195-4090

ABSTRACT

Racial prejudice has long been embedded in language as a means of constructing and sustaining social hierarchies. This study examines how racial prejudice is linguistically expressed in historical and contemporary American literature through a comparative analysis of 12 Years a Slave (1853) by Solomon Northup and The Hate U Give (2017) by Angie Thomas. Using a qualitative comparative textual analysis, the study applies Allport's (1954) Scale of Prejudice as a language-centred analytical framework to examine verbal and discursive manifestations of prejudice across five stages: antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack, and extermination. Data were selected through purposive sampling and analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal a diachronic shift from overt racial slurs and explicit dehumanisation in 12 Years a Slave to racially coded, institutionalised, and ostensibly neutral language in The Hate U Give; however, the underlying function of prejudicial language remains consistent. In both texts, language operates as a mechanism of power that marginalises African American identities, legitimises unequal treatment, and normalises systemic violence, albeit through historically distinct linguistic forms. By foregrounding linguistic continuity and transformation, this study contributes to literary discourse analysis and highlights the enduring role of language in reproducing racial inequality despite changing social norms.

Keywords: Racialized Prejudice, African American Slavery, historical, contemporary prejudice, Linguistic Impact

Received: 9 April 2025, **Accepted:** 15 July 2025, **Published:** 30 January 2026

1.0 Introduction

Racial prejudice has long been embedded in human societies, often expressed through language and cultural practices. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) interpret that the essential core of culture is made up of traditional ideas and especially their attached values. Cultural expectations and experiences frequently influence human behaviour, and this process typically takes place in subtle, sometimes unconscious ways (Kite et al., 2023). This relates to another form of sociological behaviour which is ethnocentrism. Miller and Barbara (2013) defined ethnocentrism as evaluating another culture using one's standards rather than those of the other specific cultures.

Throughout history prejudice and discrimination have not been a foreign topic to humanity as it is a common occurrence that can happen to anyone and one of the major cultural prejudices that goes long back in human history is slavery in America (Payne et al., 2019). Africans were not seen as human beings by European slave traffickers, but rather as property that could be purchased and sold (Olsthoorn,

2025). Slaves made up more than 50% of the population in the states' tobacco-growing regions by 1776 then, slavery moved to the southern rice and cotton plantations (Zeuske, 2023). European mercantile activities greatly influenced the economic fortunes of the privileged in society, but at the same time stimulated the rapid expansion of slavery to various coastal societies, particularly in West Africa (Nasidi, 2022).

As a result, the historical forms of prejudice, specifically during the era of African slaves is widely created linguistic patterns that dehumanized African Americans and normalized prejudiced treatments (Bailey, 2022). Several movies and novels were made based on the African slavery that survived the history and one of them is in the novel titled '12 Years A Slave' (1853) by Solomon Northup. The novel is through a first-person slave narrative, vividly documented the patterns, including the use of racial slurs, verbal abuse, and physical abuse experienced by enslaved individuals in the era (Olsthoorn, 2025). Through the narratives, the verbal expressions of prejudice and the subtle ways in which language were reinforced in hierarchical social structures were captured.

The novel *12 Years a Slave* was selected for this study as it is one of the few slave narratives written by a formerly free, educated African American who was forcibly enslaved (Chukwu, 2020). As Northup's narrative provides a legally verified, first-person testimony that documents how racial slurs, commands, and everyday speech functioned as instruments of power within the slave system hierarchy (Chen, 2025; Olsthoorn, 2025). Therefore, this makes the novel especially suitable for linguistic analysis, as it captures not only the physical violence but also the routine of verbal practices that normalised dehumanisation and sustained racial hierarchy (Green, 2023). On the other hand, the novel *The Hate U Give* (2017) was selected due to the representation of contemporary moments in which overt racial slurs are publicly condemned, but racial prejudice still happens through coded, institutional, and media-driven languages (De Silva Ananda & Hafizh, 2020). Unlike other civil-rights narratives, the novel shows how racialised discourse happens within policing, education, and journalism, making it relevant for examining modern forms through Allport's scale (Gul et al., 2024; Paryutty, 2024). The novel focuses on police violence and public discourse which allows for a direct comparison with historical forms of racial control, showcasing how linguistic prejudice adapts rather than completely disappears in post-civil-rights America.

Although historical narratives illuminate various forms of racialized language, analysing a more contemporary text is essential to explore the persistence or transformation of linguistic patterns across time. Consequently, a novel by Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (2017) also illustrates the prejudice that persists through coded language, stereotypes, and discursive mechanisms that are much like historical slurs, serve to sustain existing social hierarchies. Recent literary and discourse research has highlighted how *The Hate U Give* encodes racialized meanings through narrative and linguistic choices that reflect both overt and covert forms of prejudice, including stereotypical representations that reinforce social marginalization (Gul, Ayaz & Laila, 2024). A study by Rahman, Yuzar & Kholid (2024) found that racial slurs in literacy works indicate that, while derogatory expressions change in their usage and form over time, the function still lies in reinforcing out-group negativity within racialized discourse. Despite a number of studies of each novel, comparative studies remain scarce on how racial prejudice is expressed linguistically across historical and contemporary narratives.

To address this gap, the current study applies Allport's (1954) Stages of Prejudice as a language-centred analytical framework, focusing on the verbal and discursive applications of prejudice over social outcomes. This framework assists in giving a systematic comparison between the explicit racial slurs in both *12 Years a Slave* and *The Hate U Give* novels, alongside showing the persistence and transformation of racialized discourse across time. By foregrounding the language of prejudice, this study advances literary discourse analysis and offers a diachronic perspective on the textual construction and maintenance of racial hierarchies. Beyond literary study, the findings carry broader societal implications: by uncovering how racialized language evolves yet continues to reinforce exclusion, the study contributes to public awareness of the subtle mechanisms through which prejudice is sustained. According to a Pew Research Centre analysis (2016), black Americans in the US continue to experience considerable discrimination and unfavourable stereotypes. According to the study, 64% of black Americans thought they were treated unfairly compared to white people at work, and 55% said they

were treated unfairly when dealing with the police. Whereas, 44% of white Americans thought that discrimination against black people was uncommon. This awareness can inform educational practices, anti-racism initiatives, and policy discussions, encouraging more critical engagement with language as a tool of social power and inequality. Both novels are selected to enable a comparison of racial prejudice across two historically distinct yet ideologically connected moments in American society (Frątczak-Dąbrowska, 2021). Through a pairing comparison between a solid slave narrative and a contemporary novel, the study is able to examine how racialised language evolves while maintaining continuity in function across time.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To identify the racial slurs and prejudiced language in *12 Years a Slave* novel.
2. To identify the racial slurs and prejudiced language in *The Hate U Give* novel.
3. To compare how racial prejudice is expressed in historical and contemporary texts.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Historical Racial Prejudice in Literature

The study of racialized language in literary texts reveals how verbal expressions of prejudice serve as both reflections and instruments of broader social hierarchies, warranting nuanced analysis across both historical and contemporary contexts. Texts on historical slave narratives, specifically, Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave* (1853), showed that the linguistic view of antebellum narratives is saturated with multiple kinds of racial slurs and dehumanising terms that reproduce and create systems of racial oppression. As an example, a study by Wulandari (2020) analyses the narratives of historical slaves which underscores the role of hereditary categorical thinking and outgroup derogation in sustaining racial prejudice, showcasing how characters are linguistically portrayed as inferior through repetitive patterns of degrading speech. This interpretation is strengthened by sociolinguistic research suggesting that slurs are not neutral lexical items but culturally loaded symbols of exclusion, presupposing and perpetuating social hierarchies (Mutlaq & Karim, 2024; Popa-Wyatt & Ginzburg, 2025). On the other hand, Chen (2025) portrayed Northup's narratives as particularly significant, not just for its firsthand experience of enslavement but for its documentation of language as both a cognitive and ideological force that shaped the perceptions of African American identity in the nineteenth century.

The concept of white ethnocentrism holds that everything is there for the benefit of the white gaze (Pitchford, 2020). The feeling of entitlement and superiority among white Americans will cause them to mistreat people of other cultures. According to Riley (2020), by the early 1970s, many civil rights radicals held the view that black prisoners were the group most victimized by white racism and thus most in need of political assistance. Ethnocentrism turns into a problem when people think that other cultures are not just different, but also inferior and that they are much more likely to act in ways that are harmful to people from other cultures (Mishra, 2021). Ethnocentrism significantly contributed to the justification and continuation of slavery as at that time, white people viewed black people and other races as beneath them (Pew Research Centre, 2016). Unlike fictional or more contemporary novels on racism, the novel '*12 Years a Slave*' represents one of the most authentic and firsthand experiences of slavery and racial prejudice in the 19th century (Chen, 2025). Therefore, making it valuable for analysis to examine the prejudice in a context that is historically accurate and relevant to study.

2.2 Racialized Language in Contemporary Texts

Contrastively to explicit usage of racial slurs in historical narratives, contemporary novels such as Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017) showcase the way language conveys racial prejudice through both overt and subtle linguistic methods. In a study by Gul, Ayaz, and Laila (2024) argue that while there is a noticeable decline of slurs in modern narratives, subtle forms of aversive racism emerge instead and stereotype-infused descriptors that quietly reinforce systemic bias while appearing neutral. Through critical discourse analysis, their investigation shows how characters' dialogue reflects broader social tensions, with seemingly neutral language subtly reinforcing racialized norms and social boundaries.

Additionally, Paryutty (2024) study deepens this line of inquiry by showing how the novel embeds stereotype activation within seemingly ordinary linguistic choices. Choices of words that appear to be causal or neutral often carry underlying ideological weight, subtly reinforcing racism while allowing speakers to maintain social deniability. Based on these, it can be seen that prejudice is still happening through the normalization of everyday speech patterns that quietly reproduce racial hierarchies.

Amjid, Ali, and Muhammad (2022) further strengthen this argument by showing that coded racialized language can mimic the discriminatory impact of historical slurs even in the absence of explicit profanity or epithets. Their analysis states that the effects of racialized discourse lie not only in its most visible forms but also in the ability to disguise exclusions beneath covers of euphemism and semantic drift. Based on these studies, it can be seen that the basic intent of racialized language is still present even though explicit profanity is less prevalent in contemporary narratives. The change is from explicit languages to a more subtle way of stereotype reproduction rather than bias against equality. This clear evolution shows how language adapts to shifting social norms, substituting coded bias for explicit language, but it still acts as a strong instrument to maintain systemic inequality over time.

2.3 Racial Slurs, Discursive Mechanisms, and Language Prejudice

Globalization has become significant in reshaping contemporary racial issues by increasing global interconnectedness. According to the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), in 2024, migration has become increasingly popular and has increased by double since 1990. Especially in Europe, the history of colonialism has created racial hierarchies that impact how migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia are perceived and treated (Lewicki, 2024). These migration patterns have led to an increase in racial diversity globally, but they have also fuelled tensions on national identity and belonging (Dražanová & Gonnot, 2023). The increasing visibility of these nationalist movements has led to heightened racial anxieties and backlash against migrants, particularly those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds (Kassam, 2025).

A study done by Najdowski (2023) discovered that an enduring social psychological consequence of slavery is the cultural prejudice that depicts Black people as criminals. This stereotype, rooted in the historical association of Blackness with deviance and danger, continues to shape public perceptions and institutional practices long after the formal abolition of slavery. The study underscores how these prejudicial narratives are not simply remnants of the past but are actively reproduced in contemporary discourse, media portrayals, and legal systems. A study done by Rahman, Yuzar, and Kholid (2024) reveals that derogatory expressions and slurs continue to appear across genres, suggesting enduring sociolinguistic patterns of prejudice. Their findings align with Mutlaq and Karim (2024), who emphasised that racial slurs cannot be understood solely by frequency counts, instead, historical resonance, context, and cultural valence should also be studied to understand racial insults. Together, these studies add to the literature on literary narratives by illuminating the ways in which racialized language operates on both the ideological and lexical levels. Additionally, they offer a theoretical link to Allport's (1954) conceptualization of prejudice by demonstrating how racialized language, whether overt or coded, functions as a marker of systemic bias ingrained in speech. This lends credence to the notion that language analysis in literature necessitates the use of instruments that can take into consideration both explicit and implicit discursive techniques.

2.2 Allport's (1954) Scale of Prejudice

Allport (1954) created the Scale of Prejudice, a commonly used instrument to assess degrees of prejudice and discriminatory attitudes. A sequence of statements is made, to which participants reply by agreeing or disagreeing. The framework includes five stages in total which start from antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack, and extermination. The stages are based on how severe the discrimination is because it could lead to mass genocide. The driven cognitive approach he outlined is likely to have an impact on the belief in nature (Roets & Hiel, 2011). The scale evaluates many aspects of prejudice and offers a numerical assessment of their severity as higher scores represent more racial prejudice. The behaviours of estrangement and avoidance, or in the worst instance, extermination, are caused by prejudice, which causes discrimination to occur (Juni Anugerah et al., 2022). The scale

supports attempts to lessen prejudice and foster social harmony by enabling researchers to better understand the nature of prejudice, monitor changes over time, and track improvements.

Focusing on the causes of racial prejudice against African Americans, Wulandari (2020). She makes the case that white people are inherently competitive and think it's critical to protect their self-esteem. Due to this, they discriminate against and perceive African Americans as inferior. A study by Awuor (2021) showed a similar finding in recent settings, Black-African international students in American institutions frequently experience racial discrimination from Black Americans as well as other non-BAISs. Regardless, Awuor (2021) used a quantitative approach which is the opposite of this study. By applying a structured theoretical framework to analyse the narrative of *12 Years a Slave*, this research addresses a gap in understanding the stages, intensity, and narrative patterns of prejudice in historical contexts, offering insights that go beyond statistical measurement to explore how prejudice is constructed, experienced, and represented. Specifically for modern studies, a structured framework such as Allport's Scale of Prejudice could display the intensity of prejudice utilizing a factual historical literature as a lens of reflection, allowing readers to learn from historical instances of discrimination and understand the mechanisms.

3.0 Methods

The article adopts a qualitative comparative textual analysis to investigate the use and impact of racial slurs in two American novels from different historical periods: *12 Years a Slave* (1853) by Solomon Northup and *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas. Qualitative analysis refers to investigating and comprehending the meaning that individuals or groups assign to a social or human situation (Creswell, 2023). Rather than quantifying instances of prejudice, this study focuses on how racial prejudice is linguistically articulated within narrative discourse. Content-analysis, especially in qualitative study is useful in looking into the patterns and themes of the data systematically. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select texts and excerpts that are relevant to the research objectives. While numerous slave narratives and contemporary works address racial prejudice, "*12 Years a Slave*" offers a uniquely authentic, detailed, and gendered account of slavery from the perspective of an educated free man turned slave. Additionally, revisiting historical narratives like this enables scholars to trace the origins of modern systemic inequalities and critically examine their lingering effects. This historical lens offers a critical vantage point for understanding the roots of systemic inequality, revealing how the patterns of dehumanization and ethnocentrism established in slavery persist in reconfigured forms today. Contrastively, *The Hate U Give* novel was selected as the contemporary counterpart as it depicts racial discourse within modern institutional, educational, and media contexts, whereby explicit racial slurs are frowned upon but are often replaced by racially coded language.

This study makes use of purposive sampling to gather data needed to answer the research questions. In light of the theme, this study highlighted the cultural prejudice specifically towards African-American slaves as the prejudice is still ongoing up until now. This focused selection allows for depth of analysis within the constraints of article length while maintaining methodological rigor. Nevertheless, this selective approach is considered as one of the limitations of this study, while the selected chapters capture the escalation and intensity of prejudice outlined in Allport's framework, they do not showcase the full narrative of the novel. Data were then analysed through Allport's (1954) Scale of Prejudice as the primary analytical framework. Although Allport's framework was mainly developed within social psychology, the framework is applied in this study as a discursive analytical tool to categorise the functions of prejudicial language within literary texts. The chosen novels are particularly suitable for application of Allport's framework as they have all five stages of prejudice in their most overt and sequential form, which allows the framework to be applied with minimal interpretive ambiguity. Consequently, the chosen excerpts which best reflect each stage are explained in detail with justification based on linguistic function rather than moral evaluation. Therefore, both novels are suitable for comparison as *12 Years a Slave* novel functions as the baseline text against which contemporary manifestations of linguistic prejudice can be meaningfully compared.

Although formulated in 1954, Allport's Scale of Prejudice remains influential in social psychology and prejudice studies. It offers a clear, cumulative structure for tracing the escalation of bias from subtle verbal slurs to systemic extermination. It has been successfully applied in other research, like El Arba's

(2019) study on the film *Selma* and Fenteng's (2023) work on prejudice and violence. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the model, while systematic, was developed within a mid-20th-century context and may underrepresent the complexities of intersectionality, especially regarding gender, class, and sexuality. The decision to retain Allport's model stems from its proven utility in sequentially categorizing prejudice manifestations, yet future research might integrate intersectional or postcolonial theories to capture additional dimensions of systemic oppression. The many levels or phases at which discrimination manifests are described by Allport's (1954) Scale of Discrimination which includes antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack, and extermination. This framework has a clear and direct method for categorizing the discriminations in scales. The coding schemes based on Allport's framework are included in Appendix 1.

4.0 Results

This section presents the findings of the qualitative comparative analysis of racial slurs and racially charged language in *12 Years a Slave* and *The Hate U Give*, analysed using Allport's (1954) Scale of Prejudice. Rather than treating prejudice solely as a historical condition, the results demonstrate how linguistic expressions of prejudice persist across time, shifting from explicit racial slurs in the 19th century to coded and institutionalised language in contemporary discourse.

4.1 The First Stage: Antilocution (Verbal Prejudice)

Table 1

Sample of Antilocution Stage Through Linguistic

Text	Linguistic Form	Example Terms	Implication of Language
<i>12 Years a Slave</i> (1853)	Explicit racial slurs	“nigger”, “black wench”	Open dehumanisation to assert racial and social inferiority (Wilson, 2020)
<i>The Hate U Give</i> (2017)	Racially coded labels	“thug”, “gangbanger”, “from the hood”	Implication of criminalisation which devalue moral without overt slurs

In *12 Years a Slave* novel, antilocution is demonstrated with overtly dehumanizing terms and explicit racial slurs that were socially acceptable during the slavery era. Slave owners at that era frequently used derogatory terms like “nigger” and “black wench” to maintain racial hierarchy, express power, and deny individuality, as shown in Table 1. These terms were not only insults, they also functioned as discursive tools that codified Black inferiority, making it linguistically acceptable to treat enslaved individuals as property rather than human beings with rights (Brown, 2019). By consistently normalizing Black inferiority and providing justification for additional violence, these slurs functions as a tool to control them in social hierarchy. From the perspective of Allport's (1954) Scale of Prejudice, these verbal expressions exemplify antilocution as the first stage of prejudice, where prejudicial beliefs are articulated through speech, establishing a foundation upon which more severe forms of discrimination and violence could escalate.

In contrast, *The Hate U Give* novel shows how racially coded language has replaced overt slurs. The characters use phrases like “thug”, “gangbanger”, and references to being “from the hood” to subtly criminalize African American people. Though in socially acceptable forms, these statements have the same antilocutionary purpose as historical insults by attaching unfavourable moral and behavioural presumptions to African American identity (Pfeiffer and Hu, 2024). This linguistic evolution shows that although explicit forms of dehumanization have declined, the underlying method of racial prejudice still remains, language is still being used to enforce social hierarchies and marginalizes racialized communities. Additionally, Thomas's work highlights the intersection of race and structural inequality,

showing that coded language not only stigmatizes individuals but also reinforces systemic barriers related to policing, education, and socioeconomic mobility. In this way, contemporary racially coded discourse functions as a subtle yet powerful means of social control, echoing the functions of historical slurs while adapting to a society that ostensibly rejects overtly offensive language.

4.2 The Second Stage: Avoidance (Social Distancing)

Table 2

Sample of Avoidance Stage Through Linguistic

Text	Mode of Avoidance	Example Terms	Implication of Language
<i>12 Years a Slave</i> (1853)	Deliberate avoidance	Overseers ignoring enslaved individuals	Denial of personhood, as a symbol of erasure or rejection
<i>The Hate U Give</i> (2017)	Social conversational withdrawal	White peers avoiding racial discussions	Avoiding discomfort and dismissal of African American experiences

Avoidance is the least presented in *12 Years a Slave*, due to the structural conditions of slavery that require constant surveillance, command-based interaction, and enforced proximity between enslavers and enslaved. Unlike in social contexts where avoidance may happen by physical or social distancing, the plantation system required continuous engagement to maintain labour and control. Therefore, situations with deliberate non-recognition are symbolical as avoidance (Guimarães, Lage, and Tonacio, 2025). Slaves are deprived of social visibility and humanity when overseers or masters refuse to recognize their existence or personhood. By portraying enslaved individuals as invisible or unimportant unless they are specifically needed for labour or punishment, this type of avoidance reinforces their marginalized place within the social hierarchy.

In *The Hate U Give* novel, avoidance is clearly identified through social, emotional, and institutional distancing, reflecting the norms in society. Starr Carter's experiences at her mostly white school serve as an example of how racial prejudice frequently takes the form of discomfort, retreat, and silence rather than overt animosity (Abate, 2025). For example, white peers and authority figures tend to avoid discussions of racial violence, refuse to engage in conversations on systemic injustice, or belittle African American suffering to preserve social harmony and personal comfort. This avoidance is not neutral and it functions as a way to maintain racial inequality by refusing to acknowledge injustice (Prihatika & Rokhman, 2020). Table 2 shows the avoidance stage through linguistic.

4.3 The Third Stage: Discrimination (Institutional Inequality)

Table 3

Sample of Discrimination Stage Through Linguistic

Text	Form of Discrimination	Example Terms	Implication of Language
<i>12 Years a Slave</i> (1853)	Denial of food, shelter, health care	Language of usefulness and ownership	Physical and psychological deterioration
<i>The Hate U Give</i> (2017)	Unequal legal and media treatment	“Suspect”, “drug dealer”	Justification of injustice and reduced public sympathy

The systematic denial of basic human needs such as sufficient food, shelter, medical care, and protection can be seen in *12 Years a Slave*. Slaves' status as property is reinforced when resources are given to them based on their assessed economic worth rather than their basic needs. Plantation accounting explicitly valued enslaved people as capital assets, with prices tied to age, sex, skills, and "productive efficiency," not to their needs or well-being (Narayanan & Pritchett, 2021). As enslaved people are often portrayed as objects that reduce their value to labour production, language plays an important role in this system (Bourne, 2022). This systemic prejudice has serious psychological and physical effects, demonstrating how structural inequality affects daily interactions and conversations.

On the other hand, discrimination in *The Hate U Give* occurs through institutional language and decision-making, specifically in the discourse of law enforcement and media. In the novel, after his passing, Khalil's identity is frequently framed by terms like "drug dealer", "suspect", or "gang-affiliated". These phrases are used discursively to legitimize institutional inaction, reduce public sympathy, and justify unfair treatment (Gyamfi, 2025). These linguistic practices have real repercussions, such as the denial of justice and the perpetuation of racialized legal disparities, even though they are less obviously violent than earlier forms of discrimination (King and Jacobs, 2024). The contrast shows that although prejudice has changed in form, its purpose remains in language and power. Table 3 shows the discrimination stage through linguistic.

4.4 The Fourth Stage: Physical Attack (Violence)

Table 4

Sample of Physical Attack Stage Through Linguistic

Text	Type of Violence	Example Terms	Implication of Language
<i>12 Years a Slave</i> (1853)	Whippings and beatings	Slurs preceding punishment	Legitimation of bodily harm
<i>The Hate U Give</i> (2017)	Police shooting	Post-event criminalising discourse	Retroactive justification of violence

In the novel *12 Years a Slave*, physical violence is overt, obvious, and frequently accepted within the slavery system. Racial slurs are frequently used before or after whippings, beatings, and other physical punishments (Ferraro, 2023). Through the portrayal of physical abuse as a suitable punishment to alleged noncompliance, these labels dehumanize the victim as well as justifying violence. A study by Kteily and Landry (2022) stated that dehumanisation shows that describing targets as animals, vermin, or disgusting beings strips them of moral standing and makes harsh treatment feel permissible or necessary. Experimental work finds that dehumanising language especially increases support for instrumental violence, harm seen as useful such as punishment or control, exactly the way plantation violence was framed as a "necessary" response to slave noncompliance (Rai et al, 2017). Hence, language here serves as a tool for justification and preparation that permits severe physical violence.

In *The Hate U Give* novel, physical attack is shown primarily through state-sanctioned violence, most notably police shootings. In contrast to the obvious cruelty of slavery, modern violence is frequently presented as acceptable or legitimate. Although racial slurs may not be present during violent incidents, but post-event speech is vital in justifying harm. Selective narratives and criminalizing labels are used to justify the use of force and place the responsibility on the victim. Social media and news discourse around police killings of African American men, frequently deploy victim-blaming narratives, to portray deaths as deserved punishment rather than systemic injustice (Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018). In this situation, language functions retroactively, creating a narrative that makes the violence socially acceptable rather than coming before the violence. Table 4 shows the physical attack stage through linguistic.

4.5 The Fifth Stage: Extermination (Erasure of Life)

Table 5

Sample of Form of Extermination Stage Through Linguistic

Text	Form of Extermination	Example Terms	Implication of Language
<i>12 Years a Slave</i> (1853)	Execution, death through neglect	Language of disposal such as “sales” or “death”	Literal elimination of African slaves’ life
<i>The Hate U Give</i> (2017)	Normalisation of African American people death	Repetitive blame narratives	Discursive erasure, social acceptance loss

Extermination is blatant and evident in *12 Years a Slave* novel, including executions, neglect-related deaths, and verbal intentions for the removal or death of slaves in that era. The ultimate dehumanization of slaves’ life is reflected in the language used. Dehumanizing rhetoric is described as an “insidious precursor” to genocide and extreme violence, where groups are depicted as vermin, parasites, or threats that must be eliminated or controlled (Fischer and O’Mara, 2023). This reduces existence to a problem that needs to be solved through sale, punishment, or death. Such language illustrates Allport’s framework’s final stage, in which prejudice leads to the total eradication of humanity.

In *The Hate U Give* novel, extermination appears as a symbolic and systemic form rather than through overt declarations of deaths. Fatalities are frequently normalized by prevailing narratives that hold victims accountable for their own deaths (Williams et al., 2023). In the novel, public discussion, judicial decisions, and media discourse all work together to create a discursive extermination process in which fatalities are normalized and deemed undeserving of prolonged anger. This type of extermination, although less obvious, is just as harmful because it showcases a culture that views African American lives as disposable (Mitchell, 2022). The endurance of these stories shows how the concept of extermination has changed over time, moving from outright physical eradication to the institutional and rhetorical normalization of death. Table 5 shows the form of extermination stage through linguistic.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Comparison of Prejudicial Language in Historical and Contemporary Texts

The linguistic forms of racial prejudice in *12 Years a Slave* and *The Hate U Give* reveal both historical continuity and transformation in how racialised language functions to maintain social hierarchies. In *12 Years a Slave* novel, racial prejudice is expressed through explicit racial slurs and dehumanising terms that were socially common within the slavery era. Terms such as “nigger” and labels like “black wench” are used to publicly and unambiguously demote enslaved individuals to a subhuman status which reinforces structural domination and justifies systemic violence. Linguistic anthropology more broadly shows that language in settler-colonial contexts is systematically used to racialize, rank, and render Black people less than fully human, naturalizing hierarchies that underwrite white supremacy and plantation economies (Aminu, 2025). Within the plantation context, such explicit language functions as a linguistic mechanism of power that systematically affirms white supremacy and denies the personhood of African American individuals (Banaji et al., 2021).

Conversely, *The Hate U Give* novel illustrates how modern racial discourse frequently substitutes explicit slurs with coded, racially charged language that appears socially acceptable while still performing similar discriminatory functions. Contemporary discourse in the novel uses terms like “thug”, “gangbanger”, and “drug dealer” to implicitly racialize African American characters, specifically in media and law enforcement narratives. These labels may not explicitly flag race but it does invoke racial stereotypes that align with broader cultural associations linking African American

people with criminality and danger (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Such language becomes a discursive tool that shapes public perceptions and institutional responses without the overt hostility seen in historical texts (Bucholtz, 2019). This shift aligns with patterns identified in recent discourse studies showing how racial disparity and profiling are embedded in narrative forms across genres, including law enforcement and media discourse in the novel (Sari and Kurniawan, 2024).

Despite the differences there are still similarities between the two novels, such as the language remains central to sustaining racial prejudice. Historical slurs and contemporary coded language each function to produce social distance, justify unequal treatment, and normalise marginalisation. Slurs and epithets homogenise and dehumanise groups, cueing ideologies that treat them as less than fully human (Embrick and Henricks, 2013). While society has moved away from the overt use of explicit racial slurs, the discursive effects of coded racialised language reveal that prejudicial structures persist in subtler but equally impactful ways. This continuity highlights the importance of analysing not just the presence of racialised terms, but their function in discourse and social ordering.

5.2 Linguistic Continuity and Transformation of Racial Prejudice

The comparative analysis of *12 Years a Slave* and *The Hate U Give* demonstrates that language functions not only to show racial prejudice but also as a powerful mechanism whereby power is exercised and social control is sustained. Both of the novels chosen show that although they are different in terms of linguistic forms, prejudicial language can still be used to regulate behaviour, legitimise inequality, and maintain racial hierarchy. In the historical text, language is utilised as an explicit instrument to dominate the slaves. In order to reinforce authority and obedience, racial slurs and dehumanising terms are used within everyday interactions between enslavers and enslaved individuals (Pradhani, 2025). This routine of language usage diminishes the individuality and moral worth of slaves, justifying violence and exploitation. Through the repetition of framing slaves as inferior by language, slave owners normalize coercion and ensure compliance, proving that language functioned as a psychological extension to have physical control (Sekaja et al., 2022). Specifically in this context, verbal abuse cannot be separated from material oppression, as it goes along with justification of violent acts.

Compared to historical texts, the contemporary novel *The Hate U Give* shows that power is exercised through a more subtle, institutionalised use of language. Although overt racial slurs have become a taboo topic and socially unacceptable in modern era, this shift does not eliminate linguistic domination. In fact, racial prejudice is now changing and used through coded language within media narratives, legal discourse, and everyday conversation. For example, terms such as “thug,” “suspect,” or “drug dealer” may appear neutral, but they can become mechanisms of control, shape public perception and influence institutional decisions. By using such language, authority figures and institutions are able to regulate whose lives are deemed credible, grievable, or worthy of justice. Therefore, language becomes a means to control narratives rather than bodies directly, this reflects a transition from overt coercion to discursive governance (Pascale, 2019).

Importantly, the analysis shows that language plays a crucial role in justifying unequal outcomes. In the historical context, slurs are directly used to justify enslavement and physical punishment. However, in the contemporary context, criminalising narratives are used to legitimise institutional failure, such as the lack of accountability in cases of police violence. In both novels, language is utilised to obscure injustice by framing inequality as reasonable, inevitable, or deserved. Overall, the result shows that linguistic practices normalise domination through actions. Although prejudicial language has evolved from explicit slurs to coded expressions, the function remains intact. It is essential to understand how language can become a factor that impacts racial inequality to be reproduced across historical eras, even though societies are outwardly rejecting racist ideology.

6.0 Conclusion

The objective of this study was to look into how racial prejudice is linguistically constructed and sustained across historical and contemporary American narratives by comparatively analysing *12 Years a Slave* (1853) and *The Hate U Give* (2017) novels through the lens of Allport's (1954) Scale of

Prejudice. By utilizing language as the primary focus of analysis, the research shows that although forms of prejudiced expressions or slurs have evolved over time, the implications of prejudicial language remain consistent. Through Allport's sequential framework, this study shows that all five stages of prejudice are found in both novels. In the historical novel, prejudice progresses visibly and aggressively, resulting in literal extermination. Whereas, in the contemporary novel, extermination is seen in a symbolic and systemic form, where African American people's death is normalised and narratively justified rather than overtly celebrated. This comparison shows that the pattern of racial prejudice has not disappeared but has instead adapted to changing social norms, shifting from overt brutality to subtler forms of discursive governance.

The study can contribute to literary discussion analysis by showing that racial slurs should not be understood only in terms of lexical offensiveness. Both explicit slurs and coded expressions should be analysed in terms of their discursive function, ideological weight, and social consequences. Other than literary study, the findings contribute to bigger social implications by showing how language continues to be used as a tool of power and social control. It is vital to acknowledge that racialized language is still happening to this day challenging persistent stereotypes, giving anti-racism education, and fostering more equitable public discussion. However, this study has its limitations of only focusing on two novels and selected excerpts; it still provides a structured and replicable framework to analyse linguistic prejudice in texts across time periods. Hence, it is recommended that future research expand this approach by incorporating different perspectives, a variety of genres, or comparative studies on various racial and cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, this research reinforces that language remains central to the reproduction of racial hierarchy, and confronting prejudice requires not only rejecting racial slurs but also critically interrogating the subtle prejudicial practices that sustain inequality.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere appreciation to the supervisor and all the experts for their time and constructive feedback throughout the research process. She also acknowledges the assistance provided by her institution in facilitating access to resources and research materials. Their support has been invaluable in ensuring the success of this work.

Conflict of Interest

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

NZAH: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration, Supervision, and Writing – Review & Editing.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Faculty Ethics Review Committee (FERC/2023/07/LG243/EX/016) on 13th September 2023.

Data Access Statement:

Research data supporting this publication are available upon request to the corresponding author.

Author Biography

Nur Zukrina binti Abu Hassan is a master's student at Multimedia University, Melaka, pursuing a Master of Philosophy (Management) under the Faculty of Business. She did her bachelor's degree in English Communication Intercultural at UiTM Shah Alam. Hence, she is particularly interested in examining contemporary social issues through narrative and content analysis.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2022). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.
- Awuor, D. C. (2020). Understanding Black-African international students' experiences in United States colleges and universities through social identity theory. *Journal of International Students*, 11(2), 514–518. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i2.2741>
- Bailey, C. (2022). The Evolution of Anti-Blackness in the American South: How Slavery and Segregation Perpetuates the Victimization of Black People. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 60, 14 - 42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224278221120811>.
- Chen, L. (2025). Analysis of power discipline and subject resistance in *Twelve Years a Slave* from the perspective of Foucault's theory. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, 19(1), 158–162. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ee7tnk37>
- Chukwu, J. (2020). The Slave Narrative in African-American Literature: A Study of Solomon Northup, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, 65, 19-31. <https://doi.org/10.7176/jlll/65-03>.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE.
- De Silva Ananda, G., & Hafizh, M. (2020). Structural Racism In Angie Thomas's Novel *The Hate U Give* (2017). *English Language and Literature*. <https://doi.org/10.24036/ell.v9i2.108085>.
- Dražanová, L., & Gonnot, J. (2023). Attitudes toward immigration in Europe: Cross-regional differences. *Open Research Europe*, 3, Article 66. <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.15691.1>
- El Arba, S. (2019). Prejudice and resistance in *Selma*: A study using Allport's scale of prejudice. *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 12(3), 44–59. https://eprints.undip.ac.id/77138/1/Mauren_Adhiba_Yudith_El_Arba.pdf
- Fenteng, A. (2023). Prejudice as a concurrent stimulus for violence: A case of an Asian community. *Psychology*, 14, 127–143. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2023.142008>
- Frątczak-Dąbrowska, M. (2021). From Racial Difference to Racial Indifference: The Neo-Liberal Narrative and Its Colonial Legacy Through the Example of *Washington Black* (2018) by Esì Edugyan. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.525>.
- Green, K. (2023). Zachary McLeod Hutchins, *Before Equiano*: A Prehistory of the North American Slave Narrative. *American Literary History*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajad091>.

- Harris, C. (2019, May 30). A history of the wench. Electric Literature. <https://electricliterature.com/a-history-of-the-wench>
- Ida, N., & Wulandari, D. F. (2020). Racial prejudice towards African Americans portrayed in 12 Years a Slave. JELLE: Journal of English Literature, Linguistics, and Education, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.31941/jele.v1i2.1225>
- Juni Anugerah, R. A., Surya, S., & Asanti, C. (2022). Scales of prejudice toward the characters as portrayed in Zootopia. Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni dan Budaya, 6(4), 1420–1427. <https://doi.org/10.30872/jbssb.v6i4.6608>
- Kassam, A. (2025, August 30). ‘Most of this is symbolic’: The new wave of anti-migrant vigilantes in Europe. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/30/europe-anti-migrant-vigilantes-spain-poland-netherlands-iceland-northern-ireland>
- Kite, M. E., Whitley, B. E., & Bernstein, M. J. (2023). The psychology of prejudice and discrimination (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1952). Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions (Vol. 47, No. 1). Peabody Museum.
- Lewicki, A. (2024). Coloniality, race, and Europeanness: Britain’s borders after Brexit. International Political Sociology, 18(3), olae025. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olae025>
- Miller, B., & Miller, J. (2013). Ethnocentrism and cultural interpretation: Understanding diversity. Oxford University Press.
- Mishra, A. (2021). Ethnocentrism and colonialism. GorakhaPatra. <https://old.risingnepaldaily.com/main-news/ethnocentrism-colonialism>
- Nasidi, N. A. (2022). Slavery and its characteristics. LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 19(2), 135–146. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361714832_SLAVERY_AND_ITS_CHARACTERISTICS
- Najdowski, C. J. (2023). How the “Black criminal” stereotype shapes Black people’s psychological experience of policing. American Psychologist. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001159>
- Olsthoorn, J. (2025). After abolition: Cugoano on “lawful servitude” and the injustice of slavery. Journal of Modern Philosophy, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.25894/jmp.2506>
- Pitchford, M. (2020, February 21). Beware of the White gaze. Fourteen East. <http://fourteeneastmag.com/index.php/2020/02/21/11505/>
- Prather, C., Fuller, T. R., Jeffries, W. L., Marsh, L., & Freedman, S. (2018). Racism, African American women, and sexual and reproductive health. American Journal of Public Health, 108(4), 410–417. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304306>
- Payne, B., Vuletich, H., & Brown-Iannuzzi, J. (2019). Historical roots of implicit bias in slavery. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116, 11693 - 11698. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1818816116>
- Roets, A., & Van Hiel, A. (2011). Allport’s prejudiced personality today. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 20(6), 349–354. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23213072>
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International migrant stock 2024: Key facts and figures. <https://www.un.org/development/desa>
- Zeuske, M. (2023). The rise of Atlantic slavery in the Americas. In D. A. Pargas & J. Schiel (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of global slavery throughout history* (pp. 379–393). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13260-5_21