

Exploring Social Exclusion: A Study of *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas

Madhumitha. K

Independent researcher, Department of English, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract: Social Exclusion, a deeply ingrained societal issue, manifests in various forms, including caste-based discrimination in India and racial oppression in the United States. This study examines the theme of Social Exclusion in *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. *Ants Among Elephants* is a memoir depicting caste-based exclusion in India, revealing the struggles of Dalit communities under entrenched social hierarchies. In contrast, *The Hate U Give* follows Starr Carter, an African American teenager who witnesses police brutality, exposing racial discrimination, economic disparity, and activism in contemporary America. Despite differences in cultural and geographical contexts, both works expose common themes such as Social and Physical Segregation, systematic oppression, Violence as a tool of suppression, the burden of silence, and Resistance against oppression. This study argues that Social Exclusion is not merely economic deprivation but a multi-layered phenomenon affecting identity, social participation, and political agency. This paper further demonstrates how these novels serve as a powerful medium to challenge dominant narratives and inspire societal change. By exploration of these novels, this research underscores the necessity of structural reforms and inclusive policies to combat exclusion and foster social justice.

Keywords: Social Exclusion, caste discrimination, racial inequality, systemic oppression, marginalization.

Social exclusion, also known as social marginalization, is when people are socially pushed to the edge of society. The term 'social exclusion' originated in France in 1970s and had a significant influence on European social policy before being taken up by the UK's New Labour Government in the 1970s. According to Hilary Silver, a renowned sociologist known for her work on social exclusion and urban inequality, "social exclusion is a process that involves the systematic blocking of individuals or groups from resources, rights, and opportunities, thereby preventing full participation in society." (531).

Social exclusion is an alienation correlated with a specific social class, race, skin colour, religion, ethnic background, caste, education, childhood experiences, or appearance. Persons with disabilities, minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals, drug users, persons who grew up in care, the older population, and youth are also affected by social exclusion. Direct and indirect forms of social exclusion encompass people failing or not conforming to the existing normalcy of a society.

Social exclusion can be defined as the impediment to the participation of individuals or groups in the economic, social, and political life of their community. Social exclusion is a complex process that results in the gradual isolation of people from social structures and social activities.

Social exclusion is seen as the result of a combination of personal factors (such as age, gender, or race), large-scale changes in society (like shifts in the economy, the labor market, technology, or social rules), government policies and laws, and the actions of businesses, organizations, and other members of society. As Benson aptly notes, "The outcome of social exclusion is that affected individuals or communities are prevented from participating fully in the economic, social, and political life of the society in which they live. This may result in resistance in the form of demonstrations, protests, or lobbying from the excluded people" (4).

Individual exclusion occurs when an individual denied access for opportunities, resources, and social services that many people take for granted. This can happen for a multiple of reasons, including poverty, racism, sexism, disability, or other forms of discrimination. Take single mothers, for example; they were largely excluded from society before the 1900s. Even today, single mothers are often marginalized because of the societal preference for employment over caregiving. Furthermore, Benson

adds, "In some career contexts, caring work is devalued, and motherhood is seen as a barrier to employment" (5).

Women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ individuals face workplace inequality, which can be reduced through inclusive policies, education, and community support.

Community Exclusion, when entire groups of people are excluded from opportunities, resources, and social services that many have easy access. Numerous problems, including racism, poverty, and discrimination, may be the cause of Community Exclusion. Since colonization, the Aboriginal community in Australia has been marginalized, and even today many policies fail to meet their real needs

Social exclusion in the US has resulted in ongoing disparities for marginalized groups in housing, healthcare, education, employment, and justice. This Exclusion Happened because of historical discrimination and unfair policies. For instance, African Americans, Latinx, and Native American communities continue to face systemic racism, discrimination, and long-term social and economic disadvantages.

In India, at the time of independence, there was widespread optimism that democracy, universal adult franchise, and a new constitution would lead to an inclusive state where historically marginalized groups such as Dalits, tribals, religious minorities, and women would gain equal participation in all aspects. As B.R. Ambedkar asserts, "Caste is not just a division of labor; it is a division of laborers" (25).

Caste in India continues to influence political and economic power, with dominant groups maintaining control while marginalized communities face exclusion, both from upper castes and within their own groups. This pervasive nature of caste is echoed by Ambedkar, who notes, "Turn in any direction you like; caste is the monster that crosses your path" (Ambedkar 52).

Caste in India and racial discrimination in the United States are interconnected systems of social injustice rooted in ideologies of superiority, and political exclusion further reinforces inequality by preventing marginalized groups from influencing policies that affect their lives. Sen notes that "the absence of political rights makes social integration much harder" (Sen 17).

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas and *Ants among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla portray how caste in India and race in the United States create deep social exclusion, while also highlighting the resilience and collective resistance of marginalized communities against systemic oppression.

Sujatha Gidla is a prominent Indian American Writer best known for her memoir *Ants among Elephants*. This book powerfully exposes caste discrimination in India through her Dalits family history, highlighting the themes of caste oppression. Angie Thomas is a famous American writer, whose debut novel *The Hate U Give* has become a seminal work in contemporary literature. Set against the backdrop of systemic racism, police brutality, and racial inequality in the United States.

Though set in different national contexts, both works reveal the universal realities of social exclusion and demonstrate how marginalized communities resist oppression and fight for equality

Ants among Elephants by Sujatha Gidla is a powerful memoir that exposes the systemic oppression of Dalits within the caste system of India, blending personal family history with sharp social and political critique. The book centers on Gidla's family especially her uncle and mother and portrays how Dalits, historically treated as "untouchables," have been denied education, land, dignity, and social mobility. Through these lived experiences, Gidla reveals how deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination continues to shape social, political, and economic structures in India. She writes, "In your own town or village, everyone already knows your caste; there is no escaping it. But how do people know your caste when you go elsewhere, to a place where no one knows you? There they will ask you, 'What caste are you?' You cannot avoid this question. And you cannot refuse to answer" (Gidla 4)

Gidla portrays her mother's rise as an educator and her uncle K. G. Satyamurthy's revolutionary activism as powerful acts of resistance against caste discrimination, though both faced immense social and political consequences. She also critiques British colonial rule for institutionalizing and rigidifying the caste system, worsening Dalit marginalization.

Through personal experiences of humiliation, exclusion, and psychological trauma, Gidla humanizes the realities of caste-based discrimination while emphasizing resilience and activism.

Ultimately, the memoir serves as both a searing critique of entrenched caste hierarchies and a call for sustained social transformation toward dignity, equality, and justice for Dalits.

In *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas follows sixteen-year-old Starr Carter, who witnesses the fatal police shooting of her childhood friend Khalil by a white officer in the United States. The novel explores systemic racism, police brutality, and the meaning of "THUG LIFE," a concept inspired by Tupac Shakur, showing how societal oppression of Black youth harms the entire community. "Listen! The Hate U—the letter U—Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody. T-H-U-G L-I-F-E. Meaning what society give us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out. Get it? (Thomas 21).

After Khalil's death, Starr struggles with grief, fear, and her "double life" between her Black neighborhood, Garden Heights, and her mostly white private school. As the media criminalizes Khalil and the justice system fails to indict the officer, protests erupt, reflecting real-world racial injustice. Encouraged by activist April Ofrah and supported by her family, Starr finds her voice, testifies before the grand jury, and publicly speaks out for justice.

Despite violence, riots, and personal danger, Starr chooses courage over silence. By the novel's end, she vows to continue fighting against racial injustice, emphasizing that Khalil's life mattered. The story powerfully highlights themes of identity, resistance, community solidarity, and the ongoing struggle against systemic oppression. The novel ends with Starr continue to give voice for marginalized group She grabs the megaphone and chants a call for justice: "Everybody wants to talk about how Khalil died," I say. "But this isn't about how Khalil died. It's about the fact that he lived. His life mattered. Khalil lived!" I look at the cops again. "You hear me? Khalil lived!" (407).

5In Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* and Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, social exclusion is the unifying theme, influencing the lives of the main characters and society. Although the stories are set in highly contrasting cultural and geographical locations India's stringent caste system and America's racially split culture both works reveal how institutionalized discrimination, brutality, and segregation result in successive oppression. Gidla's memoir tells the story of Dalits, or "untouchables," who are pushed into lives of subservience and are denied rights, while Thomas's novel illustrates the harsh realities of racism in America, specifically in the form of brutality by the police against Black communities. Despite these variations, both pieces are remarkable in their similarity in how they approach exclusion, specifically in five areas: systemic oppression, violence as a means of control, the imposed burden of silence, social segregation, and the resistance that arises from marginalized voices. Looking at these similarities, it is evident that social exclusion in whatever form it is taken operates through highly internalized structures that oppress, isolate, and eventually try to erase marginalized identities.

Segregation in social exclusion refers to the deliberate separation of marginalized communities from the dominant group, reinforcing their inferior status through spatial, economic, and social barriers. Both *Ants Among Elephants* and *The Hate U Give* illustrate how segregation sustains exclusion by limiting access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility. In *The Hate U Give*, Starr's community, Garden Heights, is a poor African American neighborhood that is over-policed and underfunded, while her school, Williamson Prep, is in a wealthy, predominantly white area. This geographic divide reflects America's history of redlining and systemic economic segregation. Maverick, Starr's father, explains, "Look around you. We're the ones who get the short end of the stick, but we're the ones they fear" (Thomas 200). In *Ants Among Elephants*, Dalits are forced to live outside villages, denied access to temples, and forbidden from using the same drinking water as higher castes (Gidla 6). This segregation is both physical and symbolic, maintaining their status as untouchables. Both texts demonstrate how exclusion is reinforced by controlling where marginalized groups live, work, and interact, ensuring that social and economic inequality persist.

Systemic oppression refers to institutionalized discrimination and injustices that marginalize certain groups over generations, shaping their opportunities, rights, and social status. *Ants Among Elephants* and *The Hate U Give* both illustrate how systemic oppression and inherited discrimination shape the lives of marginalized individuals. In both narratives, the protagonists are born into communities where exclusion is not an isolated experience but a generational burden. Sujatha Gidla explains how her life is

defined by caste, stating, "Your life is your caste, your caste is your life" (6). This reflects Starr Carter's reality in *The Hate U Give*, where being Black means constantly navigating institutionalized racism. She acknowledges, "Funny how it works with white kids though. It's dope to be black until it's hard to be black" (Thomas 11). Both *Gidla* and Starr exist in systems that define them not by their individuality but by their assigned identities, reinforcing the idea that oppression is not incidental but deliberately maintained by societal structures.

Violence serves as a powerful tool to maintain social exclusion and control over marginalized communities, reinforcing power dynamics and systemic inequality. In *The Hate U Give*, police brutality serves as a constant reminder to African Americans of their vulnerability within the justice system. Khalil's death is not an isolated incident but part of a broader cycle where Black lives are devalued. The violence Starr faces also suppresses the truth and seeks to maintain control over the narrative, as she explains, "I've gotten death threats, cops harassed my family, somebody shot into my house, all kinds of shit" (Thomas 426). This demonstrates how violent acts are used to intimidate and silence those who seek justice, reinforcing the status quo. Similarly, in *Ants Among Elephants*, Dalits in India are routinely subjected to violence for violating social boundaries. *Gidla* recounts, "Every day in an Indian newspaper you can read of an untouchable beaten or killed for wearing sandals, for riding a bicycle" (*Gidla* 9), emphasizing how caste norms are enforced through physical violence. Just as Black individuals in America face disproportionate police violence, Dalits in India experience constant threats of violence for defying caste expectations. Both texts highlight that exclusion is not only about denied opportunities but also about the pervasive threat of violence that keeps marginalized groups in their place.

Resistance is the act of challenging and opposing systems of oppression, often at great personal risk. Both *The Hate U Give* and *Ants Among Elephants* stress resistance as a method of contesting exclusion. Starr takes the megaphone during a protest, represents her full transformation into an activist. She refuses to let Khalil be reduced to a statistic and demands that his humanity be acknowledged. Her words embody the essence of resistance challenging the systems that devalue Black lives and using her voice to demand justice: "Everybody wants to talk about how Khalil died. But this isn't about how Khalil died. It's about the fact that he lived. His life mattered." (Thomas 407). Similarly, resistance is expressed as revolutionary politics in *Ants Among Elephants*. K.G. Satyamurthy, the uncle of *Gidla*, emerges as a Maoist leader seeking the rights of the Dalits, giving up his own life in the bargain (*Gidla* 50). The two books illustrate that resistance takes various forms—whether through collective political movements or individual acts of defiance—but it is necessary to break cycles of oppression. However, both novels also acknowledge that resistance comes at a cost, as those who challenge the system often face severe consequences for their defiance.

Social exclusion, as studied in *Ants Among Elephants* and *The Hate U Give*, is a deeply rooted phenomenon that happens across various societies, whether in the form of caste in India or race in the United States. Both texts expose how exclusion is not all about economic marginalization but is also concerned with identity, social mobility, and political engagement. The systematic construction of oppression guarantees that marginalized groups stay on the edges, perpetuating cycles of discrimination and inequality.

Both *Ants Among Elephants* and *The Hate U Give* present intensely personal, yet politically complex, explorations of social exclusion. They show how race and caste work as a system of oppression that determines access to resources, social mobility, and even the right to exist unafraid. The books demonstrate that exclusion is not simply a matter of individual prejudice but is sustained by institutions, geography, and cultural narratives that all act in concert to perpetuate power relations. But they also demonstrate that resistance through activism, education, or community solidarity is possible, even if it is at enormous cost. Through an illumination of these facts, both texts compel readers to meet head-on the injustices that continue to govern society and to understand that the battle against exclusion is by no means over. Both *Gidla* and Thomas use their writing to challenge dominant narratives and inspire readers to confront the ongoing issues of inequality, urging society to reflect on the deeper structures of exclusion and work towards a more just and equitable future.

In spite of such obstacles, Sujatha Gidla and Angie Thomas both speak to the strength of resistance. Through activism, education, and narrative, communities and individuals contest the systems that marginalize them. Whether Starr Carter's struggle for justice or the Dalits' quest for dignity, the stories show us that resistance albeit at a price is necessary for societal transformation.

To address social exclusion in both the U.S. and India, a multifaceted and intersectional approach is required. This includes enacting policies that tackle the root causes of systemic discrimination based on race, caste, gender, and other social hierarchies while ensuring equitable access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for all. Implementing inclusive hiring practices, enhancing diversity in leadership, and promoting fair representation in media are also crucial in breaking down barriers and fostering a more inclusive society.

This comparative study emphasizes the universality of social exclusion and the necessity of structural changes. By recognizing the common plight of various marginalized communities, society can progress towards an inclusive and equal future. Literature, as evident from these pieces, is an effective vehicle in revealing injustices and provoking action against oppression.

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