

Forms of Political Resistance: Analyzing Literature and Art

Emil Tom Manuel

Student, Nirmala Training College, Ernakulam.

Email: emiltompoppy@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Resistance is an inherent quality in mankind, a quality shared by most civilizations. Human beings have perpetually resisted throughout history, especially when they were subjected to all forms of hegemony. Resistance is predominantly the thought of not giving into the unjust, impartial and immoral. The notion of resistance isn't something that is built in a single day, it is a process that begins with an even simple grain of thought like, 'this is not right'; which is formulated over time to larger and interconnected movements. Resistance is also something that isn't backed by any fixed ideas as it is a dynamic force which is subjected to change across time and adapts according to the needs of the victims. However, the one thing common about all kinds of resistance throughout history is that it brings a group of people together and sets a path for them to reach; achieved as a collective. While some acts of resistance etch themselves in history, others are erased. When the individual will to resist meets the collective will, that's where political resistance takes place. Resistance takes many forms; from an idea to meetings to rallies to protests and finally to crossing the threshold. This simple idea of resistance as a thought is further developed by emotional aspects and as it reaches the masses, the idea of resistance, sympathy and empathy is evoked. This emotional aspect, among artists, is further propagated by their art forms. This paper intends to study such texts challenging social and political hierarchies through the lens of Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA). This paper analyses how these art forms challenge unjust systems using Critical Discourse Analysis to indicate how language and visual imagery can act as forms of political resistance.

Keywords: Resistance, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Political resistance, Art forms, Social and political hierarchies

Billie Holiday and "Strange Fruit"

Systemic oppression and violence against people of colour have been a major part of history of racism throughout the world. The idea of inequality still being discussed is proof that racism still lurks. Racism wasn't just limited to unfair treatment or using derogatory terms. It often escalated to horrific violence, a reminder of what human beings are capable of when fueled by hate. A brutal reminder of such forms of violence is the lynching of Black Americans that took place in the 1900s when they were killed without trial to instill fear. This majorly took place in the Southern U.S. After the reconstruction period, this inhuman act of lynching was used to keep people of colour oppressed and to keep power among the white elitists. What is even more horrifying is that these acts of horror often happened in public, to which local authorities turned a blind eye. The lynching and the exhibition of the corpses were regarded as spectacles rather than an act of murder. Photographs were taken and were even used on postcards to assert white dominance. Even though, the children and women were not spared, a significant majority of the victims of lynching were men. This happened so often that it was a part of life until the mid- 1900s, even though groups like the NAACP tried to bring an end to it. Early civil rights activism also emerged during this time, but extensive legislative reform was still decades away. Even subtle challenges to the racial hierarchy were dangerous in the environment created by the ongoing threat of white supremacist violence. Jazz and blues developed into a significant medium for covert dissension, coded resistance, and group expression. In this

sense, "Strange Fruit" was more than just a protest song; it was a bold act of defiance that brought attention to Black suffering at a time when mainstream white society refused to acknowledge it.

The jazz and blues icon of the 20th century, Billie Holiday, became a major political figure in the American music industry amid this atmosphere of racial violence. Holiday, renowned for her expressive voice and emotional delivery, was a performer as well as a representation of survival and resistance. She recorded "Strange Fruit," a stirring and haunting protest against the lynching of African Americans, in 1939. The 1937 poem by Jewish educator and social activist Abel Meeropol served as the inspiration for the song. The poem was written by Meeropol in response to seeing a horrifying photograph of two Black men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, who had been killed in Indiana in the 1930s. The men were dangling from the branches of a tree by their necks, flanked by white bystanders dressed in formal costume, as if at a celebration. Meeropol was so horrified by the picture that he based his next poem on it. Billie Holiday later turned it into a song and performed it. Holiday took a personal risk by recording this tune, which was a direct challenge to racial injustices at the time. Record companies' resistance and the fear of retaliation did not stop "Strange Fruit" from becoming one of her staples and securing its position in the political and cultural consciousness of the time.



Fig 1: Photograph of a lynching of African Americans in the United States, early 20th century.

"Southern trees bear a strange fruit

Blood on the leaves and blood at the root

Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze

Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees"(Holiday, 1-4)

The "strange fruit" represents the Black bodies that were lynched and left hanging from trees in the American South. "Strange fruit" is a metaphor for something unnatural, grotesque, and perverse, something that does not belong in the tree but is present nonetheless, creating a disturbing contrast between the pure natural surroundings and the terrible reality of lynching. Blood represents the violence and death that accompanies the act of lynching. The image of blood staining both the leaves and the roots imply that racism's brutality pervades everything, from the victim's body (the leaves) to the most fundamental components of society (the root). It shows that racial violence has deep roots in the land and is pervasive, affecting both the sufferer and society. This dramatic photograph depicts the hanging Black bodies as they swing from trees. The "Southern breeze" creates a terrifying juxtaposition, implying that life in the South

goes on as usual in the face of such carnage, despite the atrocity taking place beneath the trees. It reflects the normality of such savagery during the period of rampant lynching. The "poplar trees" are a metaphor for the natural environment, yet they are being used as weapons of murder. The statement emphasizes the unnatural state of affairs—the trees, which are typically employed as symbols of life and growth, have now become a setting for death and horror, indicating a dreadful contradiction to their natural purpose.

"Pastoral scene of the gallant south

The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth

Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh

Then the sudden smell of burning flesh"(Holiday, 5-8)

"Pastoral scene of the gallant south," where "gallant" refers to the idyllic, romanticized image of the South, which is frequently depicted in literature and culture as a peaceful, serene location. "Gallant" implies nobility or honor. There's a notion of disparity between the notion of South being seen as 'gallant' or noble and the brutal reality of lynching. These contradictions expose how the South was praised while overlooking the people of colour being victims of acts of horror. The line, 'the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth' depicts the agony and the horror the people suffered during the time, which is in fact just the tip of the iceberg. Even after death, they were subjected to inhumane treatment as they would be left disfigured, robbed of their dignity and even the right to a proper burial. This physical brutality represents how they were dehumanized at the time. The magnolia, a fragrant flower, is often related to the Southern U.S., symbolizing images of beauty and sweetness, which adds more to the contrast.

The juxtaposition between this "sweet and fresh" aroma and the savagery of lynching highlights the beauty of nature and the cruelty of racial violence. It points out how life continues amid such terror, as if nothing is amiss, even though violence is taking place in the background. "Then the pungent odor of burning flesh," a disturbing, visceral image that emphasizes the heinous nature of lynchings, some of which

included the burning of the victim's corpse. The "burning flesh" gives the song a horrific, visceral feel. It is also a reminder of how Black corpses were consumed by the attackers' hatred and the apathetic eyes of a society that allowed such atrocities to continue.

"Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck

For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck

For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop

Here is a strange and bitter crop"(Holiday, 9-12)

The "crows" represent degradation and death. Because crows are scavengers and are associated with death and devastation, their conduct of "plucking" the fruit—the bodies—reflects their complete disregard for the value of Black lives. The image implies that the bodies, once left hanging, are turned into vulture food, illustrating how society disregards Black people's lives without guilt. The line, "For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck" emphasizes how unconcerned nature is with violence. The wind and rain are passive forces that affect bodies, further reducing them to natural objects rather than human beings, without interfering with violence. This illustrates society's indifference to brutality, as Black corpses were viewed as expendable without any opposition. The line, "For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop" refers to the natural processes that led the victims' bodies to decay. Normally, the sun is a symbol of life and vitality. The "rotting" in the sunshine emphasizes the physical and societal damage caused by lynching. When the tree that bears the "fruit" (the bodies) is unable to withstand the awful vision, the cycle ends and the "tree to drop" occurs. It implies that the violence and its representations will eventually collapse under their own weight, albeit at a heavy cost. The phrase "bitter crop" refers to the awful results of institutionalized racism, oppression, and violence. The "crop" is a harvest of pain, violence, and death rather than something constructive or fruitful. The adjective "strange" highlights the situation's unnaturalness once more. The last

line sums up the song's main point, which is that America's history of racial violence is a cruel legacy that society still must live with today.

During a time of extreme racial injustice, "Strange Fruit" serves as a potent example of literary and musical resistance. Abel Meeropol's writings expose the systematic dehumanization of Black Americans by exposing the brutality of lynching in the South with its vivid images and realistic metaphors. The song's political relevance was elevated by Billie Holiday's passionate performance, which transformed it into a protest against racial injustice. "Strange Fruit" was released during a time when civil rights activity was just beginning to gain momentum. By using art as a form of protest, it served as a powerful tool for resistance. The song left a legacy of political writing through music by challenging the social more of the day and inspiring a call for reform with its terrifying story.

Doonesbury and the Watergate Scandal

The Watergate Scandal, which took place in the early 1970s, was a major political scandal in America that began on June 17, 1972, with a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. The five people who broke in were members of President Richard Nixon's reelection committee, CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the President). A group of burglars tried to wiretap Democratic National Committee but were caught red-handed by a security guard. At first, this came off as an isolated incident. Suspicions arose later as a link was drawn between the burglars, President Nixon's re-election campaign, and the White House. As the investigations progressed, it was revealed that the break-in was part of a bigger scheme to spy on other political parties. It became evident that President Nixon and his team were behind this grand scheme and were trying to cover it up. The burglars were paid to keep their mouths shut to divert the FBI's investigation. Things turned from bad to worse for President Nixon and his team as it was further revealed that Nixon had secretly recorded

conversations in the Oval Office. Those tapes were later released to the public, which provided concrete evidence that Nixon was involved in this scheme. As pressure arose from reporters, investigators and the masses, Nixon was forced to resign on August 8, 1974, rather than being charged with crimes. He was the first U.S. president to be forcefully resigned before the end of his term. His resignation resulted in the conclusion of a very troublesome time in American politics and led to a long-lasting decline on how much people trusted the government.

The Watergate Scandal continued its impact even after Nixon left, as several top officials were found guilty and sentenced to prison. It remained pivotal in exposing severe cases of corruption even at the highest levels of government. The media played a major role in unveiling the scandal, and the trust of the public in the white house dropped significantly.

During this time of doubt and paradigm shift, a comic strip called Doonesbury by Garry Trudeau became popular among the people. It combined political satire and entertainment in a way unlike anything ever seen before. Doonesbury, launched in the 1960s and 1970s, revolved around a group of college students at Walden College, including characters like Mark Slackmeyer, Zonker Harris, and Mike Doonesbury. Over time, Doonesbury broadened to new horizons as it covered many social and political issues from a liberal point of view, including the Vietnam War and Watergate. Trudeau's characters represented counterculture and liberal values, often depicting the mood and dilemmas at the time.



Fig 2: Garry Trudeau, Doonesbury comic strip satirizing the Watergate scandal, 1973.

The Doonesbury comic strip, which was released on May 29, 1973, in which Mark Slackmeyer says "Guilty! Guilty, guilty, guilty!" in reference to former Attorney General John Mitchell, is a powerful moment of political resistance through humor during the Watergate Scandal. When the country was captivated by the Senate hearings, this comic struck a raw nerve by expressing what most Americans were already thinking but perhaps too afraid to say aloud: Nixon's and colleagues' guilt in the cover-up of the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters. Mark's happy declaration allowed Trudeau to encapsulate the growing public awareness that Nixon's closest circle of advisors, including Mitchell, were undeniably complicit in unlawful conduct, despite efforts to hide the reality.

The comic operates on various levels of resistance. In the first place, it actively challenges current governmental power by naming the alleged perpetrators in public. Doing so not only reinforces the public's sense of guilt but also demands accountability. In a political atmosphere in which the mainstream media, particularly large newspapers, were still avoiding accusations of criminal conduct against the president and his associates, Doonesbury provided an unfiltered and harsh critique. Mark Slackmeyer's happy utterance served as a channel for the public's outrage, reflecting the displeasure of people who believed the ongoing investigation was insufficient in bringing the truth to light. The comic became a means for expressing opposition in an era when the prevailing political narrative frequently tended to minimize or conceal the actions of those in power. The reaction to the comic strip demonstrates how it continued to push the limits of what was permissible to discuss. Newspapers dropped the Doonesbury strip because of its harsh comments, reflecting how heated the Watergate discussion had gotten. By defying journalistic traditions and publicly expressing what many of them were scared to say, Trudeau's work was an act of resistance against the establishment. In a way, the comic allowed for a more critical public conversation, elevating the voices of ordinary folks grappling with the consequences of the Watergate crisis.

The Doonesbury comic depicted how forms of satire can manifest into political activism. It showed how people were becoming fed up and wanted justice and transparency from those in authority. The comic acted as a platform for the public to express their emotions boldly and ruthlessly. But Doonesbury wasn't just limited to humour as it became an icon in popular culture. It demonstrated that satire isn't just for the masses, as it can be used to question authority, corruption and bring the masses into political discussions.

While Garry Trudeau's Doonesbury tackles resistance through satire and visual humor, "Strange Fruit" provides a visceral and poetic depiction of racialized violence. Nonetheless, both works serve as cultural interventions that subvert prevailing narratives. They act as public critics of the structures that support oppression and draw attention to injustice. The range of artistic resistance is demonstrated by the change from Holiday's somber protest to Trudeau's scathing sarcasm: from the sentimental to the ironic, from political corruption to racial terror. They demonstrate how art changes to satisfy the needs of its era while retaining its ability to provoke and resist, forming a continuum of dissent.

Conclusion

Doonesbury by Garry Trudeau and Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday serve as examples of how cultural expression can serve as political resistance. Despite having different styles—one satirical, the other somber and lyrical—both confront racial violence and political corruption to subvert prevailing narratives. By Critical Discourse Analysis, this study has demonstrated how rhetorical devices such as tone, irony, and metaphor allow these texts to challenge authority and reveal structural injustices. Both spoken and visual language become effective dissenting tools. These pieces affirm that confronting systemic injustice frequently starts with having the guts to speak up—and be heard—by placing resistance at the nexus of the personal and the political. These kinds of cultural artifacts, whether in the form of songs or satire, serve as a constant reminder that art can change society rather than just reflect it.

Works Cited

Washington Post. "8 Cartoons That Shaped Our View of Watergate — and Still Resonate Today."

Washington Post, 16 June 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/comics/2022/06/16/cartoons-watergate-nixon-herblock/.

Hébert, Paul. "This Week in Doonesbury: GUILTY, GUILTY, GUILTY!!!" *Reading Doonesbury*, 25 Oct.

2017, www.readingdoonesbury.com/2017/10/25/this-week-in-doonesbury-guilty-guilty-guilty/.

Accessed 8 Mar. 2025.

History.com Editors. "Watergate Scandal." *History, A&E Television Networks*, 29 Oct. 2009,

www.history.com/topics/1970s/watergate.

The Kennedy Center. "Billie Holiday + Strange Fruit." *Kennedy-Center.org*, 2020, [www.kennedy-](http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/music/billie-holiday--strange-fruit/)

[center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-](http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/music/billie-holiday--strange-fruit/)

[interactives/media/music/billie-holiday--strange-fruit/](http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/music/billie-holiday--strange-fruit/).

Van Dijk, Teun A. Critical Discourse Analysis. [www.discourses.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Teun-A.-](http://www.discourses.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Teun-A.-van-Dijk-2015-Critical-discourse-Analysis.pdf)

[van-Dijk-2015-Critical-discourse-Analysis.pdf](http://www.discourses.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Teun-A.-van-Dijk-2015-Critical-discourse-Analysis.pdf).

Wikipedia Contributors. "Billie Holiday." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 Jan. 2019,

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billie_Holiday.

Wikipedia Contributors. "Doonesbury." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Feb. 2025.