

## **Representation of racist elements in children’s literature with a brief overview on the story**

### ***Dragon Wings* by Lawrence Yep**

#### **Abstract**

The paper aims to explore the occurrence of racist elements knowingly or unknowingly in the genres of children’s literature with special focus on the story, *Dragon Wings* written by Lawrence Yep. The paper discusses not only on the presence of racist elements in *Dragon Wings*, it also centres on how the young minds are injected with the concepts of racial identity and attitudes in their minds through the works of children’s literature. The paper addresses on the stereotypical depictions of race and culture in the works written for children and also comprises how the aspect of acceptance of multiculturalism is not delivered into the children’s thoughts. The paper focuses on the story of Chinese and American cultures highlighting the work *Dragon Wings* and discusses how the author fails to generate a balance representation of multiculturalism in his works. Furthermore, the paper displays the approach of adult writers in representing and favoring their own race and culture in their writings even while focusing on children’s works.

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, race, Chinese, American, racism, children’s literature

#### **Introduction**

*“Children in medieval and Renaissance Britain were certainly provided with a wide range of reading material, books produced primarily for older readers that they were permitted or encouraged to read, as well as texts designed especially for them.”* (Grenby, 2008)

*“Up to the Georgian era there were no books at all for children or the poor, excepting the class-books containing old ballads, such as Chevy Chase, and short tales, such as The King and the Cobbler, Whittington and his Cat.”* (Hewins, 2018)

Children's literature started booming by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and before that all the books written for children were not meant for the purpose of entertainment or enjoyment. The books before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mainly concentrated on passing religious values to children or vocational aspects to the young growing minds. During these periods, people viewed children as young adults and never gave importance to their innocence or their need for fostering imagination and creativity.

*“It wasn't until the advent of the Renaissance – and, notably, of the movable printing press – that it became feasible from economic and mechanical points of view to increase the production of educational materials.”* (Alterman, 2014)

After the emergence of printing press, books related to the aspects of enjoyment started emerging and authors and writers started viewing children as someone entirely different from adults and started writing for entertaining children and imaginative literature and other forms started emerging as a result of this. However, authors on the go used children's book as a tool to persuade children and to introduce their own values, thoughts and beliefs to the children through their works. This paper identifies and discusses how the adult writers delivered the importance of their own culture to the children by misinterpreting and representing stereotypical beliefs through their children's books, with emphasis on the story *Dragon wings*.

*“By the end of the 18th century, children's literature was a flourishing, separate and secure part of the publishing industry in Britain.”* (Grenby, 2009)

Whenever we look into the aspects of literature by the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, we find a diversity of topics, represented by each and every writer in their writings, irrespective of the mode of genres used. Long before, Children's stories were an arena where our ancestors represented mythical, legendary, fantasy and cultural stories to children orally. There was a huge transition after the

late 18<sup>th</sup> century where moral principles and religious aspects were pushed on to children through the art of literature. Even though they were written for children, these essentially didn't bring much impact in the field of children's literature.

*“Educational materials specifically targeting children were produced more economically in greater volumes, and parents and educators devoted more time to rearing children, catering to their unique needs, and developing childhood as an institution distinct from adulthood.”*

(Bingham &Scholt, 1980)

The children's literature focused on the threshold aspect of instruction of delight only during the period of imaginative literature. It was only during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; instruction and delight were brought together into the field of children's literature. During this time, the authors who wrote children's works, mainly focused on three major aspects – idea of persuading the children with their point of views, providing them entertainment through their writings and making the children informative with information. Nevertheless, when it came to the representation of persuasion, writers mainly tried to relate and inject their pre-notions and concepts about society, religion, race and culture through their works. Through this the writers promoted their concepts of native culture to the young generations and misguided them by not promoting and bringing any value to the other cultures. In the story of *Dragon Wings*, we can evidently see how the author inoculates racism to his young Chinese readers towards America.

### **Literature Review**

Many researchers have applied critical race theory into the concepts of children's literature to represent mixed race identity but have mainly focused on the positive factor or how the authors deal with the promotion of awareness through children's works. Researchers have explored the

concepts of learning culture through children's books and focus on representing racism in children's book have not been of much focus so far. In his paper (2015, Brian Hibbs points out that children's literature develops intercultural competence through which they understand and appreciate their own culture.

*“Most of the children's books present a world in which all the characters, at least the significant characters, are white. In effect they reflect the segregated world in which we live and are of a constant reminder of the inordinate value placed on whiteness in our society.”* (LATIMER, 1973)

The articles reviewed from other researchers demonstrate the attitude of the writers in portraying a set of characters in the children's works by bringing domination to the white culture and thereby creating a view point to the young readers that the white community is more powerful than the rest. The general view of many researchers, who presented the aspects of racism do come up with the thought that racism has entered into the children's literature from a long time, creating stereotypical and negative characters from the weaker sections and thereby providing a strong belief to children that the whites are powerful, strong and intelligent compared to the rest. Even in the story, *Dragon Wings*, though the author supports and injects racism not by giving significance to the white but by giving importance to his own culture, however we can also see that the writer, presents a world in his story where the whites are still powerful compared to the Chinese.

*“Race is a social construct used to differentiate people into groups on the basis of mostly immutable characteristics, such as phenotype (e.g., skin color, hair texture, or eye shape) and ancestry.”* (Olivier, 2019)

Researchers have accepted the concept of racism as a raised area to compare people and distinguish them from the rest of the world, on the factors of certain human made characteristics. The authors of children's literature too tend to use the same strategy of classifying community and bringing about this distinction to children and thereby misleading the younger generations and sprouting the negativity of racism in them.

The paper here explores how the writer uses the technique and strategy of the term race and racism in his story, *Dragon Wings* to bring in love for the Chinese culture to the young readers of China, by creating and embedding negativity for another culture in them.

### **Research Methodology**

Though critical race theory emerged as legal theory, it identifies the elements of racism and the effects of racial elements in literary works. The theory helps to study the relation between cultural and racial factors. And the racist impacts can occur on culture and its after effects can also be discussed by applying the theory. Children's literature mainly focuses on developing the social and pragmatic skill of the young generation of a society. So the selection and use of themes such as racism and diversity in literary works for children owes an explanation. Incorporating racist ideas in children literature set a long term strategy to develop a critic attitude in children. Developing the character with such notions would definitely have extended influences on the children. The children's literature is renowned for its function of teaching culture and tradition of a particular society. The inclusion of racist concept to a story with a title *Dragon wings* which is so close to the Chinese culture indirectly inoculates the idea of discrimination to young minds. Children replace the needed quality of acceptance of multiculturalism with discrimination. In order to identify and explain the inclusion of racial elements in the story *Dragon Wings* reveals the American – Chinese discriminative refinement to

a certain extent. Overall the postmodern Critical race theory provides a justifiable approach to retrieve and discuss the racial elements from the story the *Dragon Wings* written by Lawrence Yep.

## **Results**

In the story, *Dragon Wings*, though the author does portray some good people who belong to the community of the white's, he generally focuses on the hardships and difficulties faced by the Chinese immigrants, when they come for their work in America. Literally, from the beginning of the story, the writer depicts the whites as harmful and harsh people, who tend to make the life of Chinese people living in the same community miserable. The writer does show the history of the Chinese immigrants through the story and open up the hardships and difficulties they undertook, indirectly by writing this book for the category of child readers, the writer also illustrate how the white people were towards the Chinese people and thereby tries to bring in the sprouts of racism in the young minds. We cannot see a balance in the representation of both cultures.

Any Chinese young reader would feel hatred towards the white community after reading the story, as it not only shows the difficulty of the Chinese immigrants in general but also render the tensions, insecurities and problems faced by the family of these immigrants living in China. This in turn depicts the attitude of the writer in pushing out the concepts of the importance of racial identity and attitudes in the Chinese young readers and in so doing he knowingly or unknowingly brings out hatred in the little minds for the other cultures and communities.

## **Discussion**

Lawrence Yep even though is a native of China, is currently regarded as a famous American writer who have contributed a lot to the field of children's literature. "*I was born in San*

*Francisco's Chinatown in 1948, but grew up in a black neighborhood. During elementary and middle school, I commuted to a bilingual school in Chinatown.*" (Scholastic, n.d) The poet was born and brought up in California and in his books he focuses on the Chinese- American culture. He generally explored the Chinese and American culture through his own experiences. Though he was in California, he lived in an African-American colony.

*"Even though his family did not speak Chinese at home, growing up, Yep always felt that he was a cultural outsider — a theme and perspective that would appear throughout his books."* (Reading Rockets, 2014)

The author grew up in a multicultural society and he was not fitted into the realms of his own Chinese ancestry during the time of his growth. *Dragon Wings* is a story that belongs to his work series, "The Golden Mountain Chronicles" that he wrote after a long research.

*Dragon Wings* is the authors second novel written in 1975, where he gives importance to the Chinese immigrants and their life in America. *"Dragon Wings was awarded the 1975 IRA children's book award."* (Yep,1977). The author brings about the experience of the Chinese immigrants in America and thereby provides a glimpse of the history of Chinese ancestry by portraying the experience of America.

*Dragon Wings* is a story of Moon Shadow, a boy of eight years who sails from his native land China to America in order to join his father and to meet him for the first time ever. Moon Shadow's father Windrider was a famous kite maker in China, but in order to make money, he travels to America depicted as the Golden Mountains in the story where the White demons stay. Windrider lives in San Francisco along with the other Tang (Chinese) community and lives by doing laundry.

Overtime, as the story progresses, we come to know the life of Chinese immigrants as well as how the poverty in China separates the Chinese people from their family and country and how they are treated by the Whites in America and so on. It is a sensitive story that focuses on the cultural heritage and history of China. Even though the writer presents American's life through the perspective of the Tang people, unintentionally he creates stereotypical depiction of racism against the whites in his story.

*“There was plenty of money to be made among the demons, but it was also dangerous. My own grandfather had been lynched about thirty years before by a mob of white demons almost the moment he set foot on their shores.”* (Yep, 2001, p.1)

Above lines, indicates how the picture of whites is illustrated to the Children of China as well as to the other child readers around the world. America is represented in the book, as kingdom of White demons, which is a dangerous place to come into. Through his character Moon Shadow the story shows how white demons lynched people of other community by providing evidence from Moon Shadow's life and thus creates a feeling of hatred towards the Whites.

*“The demons are all getting drunk and getting ready for beating up Tang men. The word is out to stay inside.”* (Yep, 2001, p. 37)

All over the story, Whites are represented as demons and it creates racist elements in the story by bringing the same thought of racist elements and attitudes in the young readers. Here, in the given lines we can see how the White people and their attitude towards the Chinese are portrayed. The book shows the supremacy of Whites over the Chinese immigrants and depicts how the Chinese suffer under them and shows how the failure in representing a balance while

showcasing the two cultures and thereby addresses certain stereotypical ideas to the young readers.

*“Among these was my great-grandfather, who had died fighting the British demons when they had wanted to force the Tang people to let them sell opium in the Middle Kingdom.”* (Yep, 2001, p. 67)

The book never talks about the negativity seen in Chinese immigrants, but always creates a standpoint to the readers that the Whites were always wrong and they tried to destroy the Middle Kingdom culture as well. These evidences provided from the text represents how the book does not accept multiculturalism, even after the story was written by a person born and brought up within the community of Whites. It describes how the story injects racism into the characters of young readers of China, by detailing the hardships and sufferings of Chinese people in America and the difficulties they face with the whites who is represented as the demons throughout the story.

## **Conclusion**

The research paper analyzed the occurrence and representations of racism in Children’s literature. It describes how the younger minds are targeted in today’s society by the older generations, to build in the racist feelings that they had in them to the younger innocent minds. The study doesn’t focus much on the psychological changes happening in children’s characters, when they read such works with racist elements. The paper discloses and identifies the misrepresentation of culture and the heritage to the young readers. It can be studied in order to understand the need for bringing the aspects of multiculturalism, especially when the authors write books for children.

The representation of racist elements in *Dragon Wings*, associated and recognized how racist elements are passed on to the forthcoming young generations and how the concept of love for another country and the aspect of being one is not taught to the children. These kinds of works instill racist attitudes in children from the time they get into the habit of reading and pass the conventional beliefs of older generations into the younger ones. Through these kinds of works, it becomes evident that even in the contemporary era, children are not taught how to love their neighbours rather they are taught with the same conventional beliefs of racism.

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