

The social construction of childhood: explored with reference to Refugee Boy by Benjamin Zephaniah

The ideas of childhood contrast as they are socially constructed (Morrow, 2011, p.4). The way childhood is explained by James and James (2004, p.13) is that it 'varies considerably across and between cultures and generations'. Thus meaning that childhood is not universal and is rather a result of culture and other societal factors (Kehily, 2008, p.7).

A child that grew up pre-industrial revolution will have extremely different childhood experiences to a child that grew up post-industrial revolution, this is because the views of childhood changed as the time changed. An example of this is children were likely to work in factories or workhouses whereas today the government must protect children from exploitation and areas of work that can cause harm to their lives and wellbeing (Department for Education, 2019).

This essay is going to explore the social construction of childhood, starting by discussing how history and changing perceptions of society have changed attitudes towards children, it will mention how the work of Ariès and the industrial revolution played a role in this too. There will also be links to the discourses and how these related to different views throughout history.

After this, it will analyse the children's book 'Refugee Boy' 2001 written by Benjamin Zephaniah. The story was published in 2001 and reflects on situations that

were happening at the time, which influenced Zephaniah. The discourses utilitarian and romantic will be discussed in relation to the story, social context and the setting will also be taken into account. At the end of this section, the key themes and the message that the author was putting across will be explored.

The essay will come to a close with a conclusion to establish what the it has talked about. This will summarise the traits that contribute to how childhood is constructed and how this influences the discourses. Finally, a summary of what has been learnt will be written along with a reflection of the impact the discourses have on today's practice.

Childhood is difficult to define, this is because it's a complicated matter. Through the course of history, people's opinions and views of childhood have changed immensely. James and James (2004, p.25) claimed, overtime there are visible changes in peoples understanding about the lives of children. The environment, culture and media are factors that can change people's beliefs about childhood.

Three discourses demonstrate society's beliefs. According to Foucault (ND, cited in Taylor, 2009, p.46), the discourses explain what is 'normal'. Consequently, the discourses that are dominant in today's society significantly affect how children are perceived and regarded, as they decide what is correct and incorrect. Thus, meaning it is essential to acknowledge that as society changes its influences which discourses are currently perceived.

Childhood has historically been observed with a great deal of difference from today's society. It is assumed that there was no perception during the middle ages. Ariès (1962, cited in Clarke, 2002, p.4) suggested that children were perceived to be smaller versions of the adults around them in the mediaeval era, therefore there was no difference between childhood and adulthood. During this period of time children were no longer relying on their mothers as they were seen to be part of the 'adult society' (Ariès, 1996, p.125).

Ariès (1996, quoted in Metcalf, 2002) argued that, until the 15th century, childhood was not a distinct phase of life. He assumed this because children were wearing the same clothes, playing the same sports and talking the same way as adults did. Also, they were not seen as sexually innocent, leading to no separation at the time in French schools between child and adult students.

However, there have been criticisms made in relation to Ariès' work as the evidence he provided is seen as unreliable. Retford (2016, p.4) states that the main support for Ariès' theory is painting's done in the medieval era, such paintings didn't always depict everyday life and were not natural. Therefore, it is argued that because of the limited support for Ariès theory, the understanding of childhood in the middle ages might not be correct.

Ariès work (1962, cited in Valkanova, 2014, p.23) suggests that the social construct of childhood was created in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This can be supported by the publication of the book 'Emile' written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), this book is significant to the history of childhood as it first portrayed that children are innocent and should be treated accordingly (McDowall Clark, 2010, p.20).

Although childhood was emerging in the seventeenth century, the society was not pleased with the idea and their views were negative. The puritanical discourse was apparent during this time and many people believed that children were born evil and needed punishments to make them good (Reynolds, 2014).

Nevertheless, the childhoods of children began to change when the industrial revolution came about in the eighteenth century. According to Humphries (2012, pp.2-5), poverty was a major problem during the industrial revolution, so many families moved in order to be able to work in the factories, however, it was not only the adults that worked in the factories as the children were taken advantage of because they could work for cheap.

Child labour was at an increase during the industrial revolution. According to Griffin (2014), the average age for starting at work was 11 and a half years old. This would include working in factories, chimney sweeps and carrying minors picks. The children would be expected to do this in dangerous conditions, low pay and long hours, this highlights that children were regarded with a low amount of care.

The mistreatment of children for work continued forward into the 1800s. During this time health issues started to arise, as many children were weakening due to their working conditions (Heywood, 2001, p.134). Following on from this discovery, the Factory Act 1833 was put in place, this making it illegal for children under the age of nine to work, it also reduced the number of hours a child could work as they started to enforce a requirement for part-time education (McDowall Clark, 2010, p.24).

The implementation of the Factory Act 1833, shows the change in attitudes towards children, this is because it began to show the harms caused by child labour and a necessary change. This law was created due to the ideas that children should be protected and be less responsible in the 'adult world', this establishes the start of society believing in the romantic discourse.

The views on childhood changed again in the late nineteenth century. This is because of the rise of philanthropy, it aimed to improve the lives of children who were living on the streets. Lord Shaftesbury and Thomas Barnardo, were key figures in this movement and made considerable contributions to this change (James et al, 1998, p.51)

Following on from this, the work done by Mary Carpenter further changed children's childhoods. According to Hendrick (2003, p.238), Mary once said children have "much to unlearn" and have to be "turned into children" again. Mary Carpenter and Lord Shaftesbury, worked together to create 'ragged schools' where children

who worked in the factories and mines, and children who were living on the streets, could go to learn (Hendrick, 2003, p.8).

Philanthropy, overall shows that over time the society started to believe that children were more innocent than not. Additionally, the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act 1889 was created, which allowed children to be treated compassionately and be protected (James and Prout, 2003, p.47). From this Rousseau's work (cited in James et al, 1998, p.13) is echoed as children are now viewed as an actual human that has needs and rights.

In 1870, with the introduction of the Education Act, the utilitarian discourse was introduced into Britain. The word utilitarian comes from the word 'utility' which means 'usefulness' (Graham, 2004, p.129). This discourse relates to 'being and becoming' as it is built around that children will become adults (Uprichard, 2008, p.303). The Education Act highlights this discourse as it focuses on the importance of an education, which allows children to gain knowledge that they will need for the future.

Over history, all these dominant discourses have influenced societal views, and as they grow they also change the views of people in modern-day society. Although, these views and opinions differ from family to family. Looking at 'Refugee Boy' (Zephaniah, 2001) an understanding of growing up within a different social context can be looked at further.

From the first pages of the book 'Refugee boy' (2001), Zephaniah portrays the utilitarian discourse in the relationship between Alem and his father, Mr Kelo. This is shown when Mr Kelo, quietly shouts "what did I tell you? From now on you must try to speak English" (2001, p.11). This shows the utilitarian discourse, as preparation for the future and conformity. This relates to the work of Ariès, (1996, quoted in Metcalf, 2002) where he states that children are smaller versions of the adults around them, thus highlighting that Zephaniah understands that refugees try to conform to the society around them.

The utilitarian discourse becomes more evident when the topic of learning comes around. As when Alem is in the taxi to the hotel and tries to "practise his English by reading the notices in the cab" (2001, p.16). Here Zephaniah is portraying that Alem understands that his learning is an important factor for his future in the country, which associates to The Education Act of 1870.

The importance of Alem's education is also mentioned later on in the story when he asks Mrs Fitzgerald if she thinks "if it's possible for (him) to go to school" (2001, p.89) following on from this he also states that "school was preparation for the future" (2001, p.124). These statements support the utilitarian discourse, as this is the key message of what discourse focuses on, preparation for later on in life (Ariès, cited in Dekker and Groenendijk, 2012, p.135).

Zephaniah portrays the utilitarian discourse from the start of the book until the very end. He portrays it in a way that re-enforces the idea that education is

important and learning as a child is in preparation for the knowledge needed for when adulthood comes around (Ariès, cited in Hutton, p.398). He portrays Alem as a studious person who doesn't like missing school, this is seen when Mr Fitzgerald told Alem to have a day off yet "he was determined to go" (2001, p.234).

Furthermore, the romantic discourse is also presented through the actions and thoughts of the characters of the story. The romantic discourse first came around in the late eighteenth century it (Heywood, 2001, p.24), explains that children are innocent and need protecting (Kehily, 2004, p.5), this goes hand in hand with Rousseau's (1979) work where he believed that children should be given the freedom they needed to be who they are, he also said that their childhood needed to be carefree and their innocence needed to be protected (Heywood, 2001, p.24).

The first representation of the romantic discourse in 'Refugee boy' (2001), happens when Alem and his father were in the airport and Alem "looked up at the high ceiling" as "it reminded him of space stations that he had seen in science-fiction films" (2001, p.12). This shows the aspect of romanticism, as Alem is using his imagination which is related to the idea of innocence. According to Rousseau's belief childhood has a way of seeing, thinking and feeling (cited in Mills and Mills, 2002, p.46). From this, it is clear that Zephaniah re-enforces the idea that children are innocent.

The concept of imagination and innocence carries on throughout the book and is mentioned again when Zephaniah writes that Alem "spent the whole day imagining how he would change London if he had the chance, and working out what bits of London he would take back home" (2001, p.22). This is where the romantic discourse becomes more evident, as the word imagination is used, this again linking to Rousseau's thoughts of children being innocent (cited in Mills and Mills, 2002, p.46).

A section of the romantic discourse is that of protection. This can be seen in the story when Stanley is crying in his sleep and is saying "Mummy, please don't go, When are you coming back? Don't leave me in here all on my own!" (2001, p.63) and then when he wakes up saying "Mummy, it's so dark, Mummy, please come back soon" (2001, p.63). Here it is clear that Zephaniah is portraying that Stanley wants protection from his "Mummy", this relates closely to the discourse as protection from the world is closely related to the ideas of innocence.

However, towards the end of the book, the romantic discourse is challenged. This is where Shelia, Mariam and a police officer come to visit Alem in his room, telling him that they have "some very bad news" (2001, p.280). They then proceed to tell him that "this afternoon there was an incident and (his) father was shot" (2001, p.281) and his "father has died" (2001, p.282). This goes against the idea that childhood should be innocent as being mentioned is an adult topic that includes some harmful images. This convocation between Alem and the others greatly contradict the romantic discourses' perspectives, as Alem is being exposed to ideas

that are not classed as 'pure'. By doing this it shows that Zephaniah is challenging the whole idea of 'are children innocent and do they need to be protected' which is the concept of the discourse.

Additionally, to appreciate the story even further taking into consideration the time and context of the story and looking at key themes can be beneficial. One key theme within 'Refugee boy' is that of social inequality. The story is based on Alem who is a refugee from Eritrea and Ethiopia who are at war with each other, thus meaning he is 'different' from the other people around him in London. This is related to real-life events as Eritrea and Ethiopia had a border war with each other, that lasted from 1998-2000, yet the countries didn't completely find peace until 2018 (Araia, 2018).

Zephaniah from the start makes inequality very clear. In the first section of the book "Ethiopia" (2001, p.7) soldiers come into Alem and his family's house and state that Alem's father is "a traitor" his mother "is the enemy" and Alem himself "is a mongrel" (2001, p.8). From this it's clear that Alem and his family are not wanted in Ethiopia, however, it is confirmed at the end of the page when the soldier says "leave Ethiopia or die" (2001, p.8). This highlights the social inequality that the family face, as they are not welcome because others believe that they are traitors and are of unequal worth. This scenario repeats itself in the second section of the book "Eritrea" yet the labels are reversed with Alem's mother being called "the traitor" and his father being "the enemy" (2001, p.10).

Inequality is present throughout the whole book, however, the clearest representation of this is when Alem and Mr Kelo are at the courthouse listening to the ruling of whether or not they could stay in London. When they are told that the war between the countries is no more than a “dispute” and that no other people from their countries “are making their way” to London (2001, p.231), this shows that the judge does not believe them when they say they are in danger if they return home and could believe that they are coming to London as ‘economic migrants’. This can be seen in news articles published in 2001 where they state that refugees and migrants “come with little and usually they move on again” (Bunting, 2001), thus meaning there was a stigma against refugees at the time that the book was published.

It is clear that Zephaniah didn’t like this stigma and challenged the idea of social inequality throughout the book and portrayed Alem and his father as hard-working people who came to London to flee from the war, the last line of the book confirms this as Alem says “I am not a beggar, I am not bogus. My name is Alem Kelo” (2001, p.291).

This essay has explored the social construction of childhood, it started by discussing how history and the changing perceptions of society have changed the attitudes towards children, it then mentioned how the work of Ariès and the industrial revolution played a role. There was also links to the discourses and how

they related to different views throughout history. Finally, the discourses were analysed in relation to the book 'Refugee Boy' (Zephaniah, 2001).

Upon reflection, it is easy to see that important events throughout history have impacted society's views on children and how they are perceived today. In conclusion, with key legislation the utilitarian discourse became more prominent, this discourse seen in modern-day practices due to compulsory education until the child is eighteen, it is also seen with the ideas of curriculums which aim to give children the knowledge that they need to be able to prepare for their adult futures.

Following on from this, another discourse that is prominent in today's practice is the romantic discourse. Safeguarding is a term that is used it signifies the measures that aim to protect the health, well-being and human rights of individuals. Safeguarding is very important with children in schools, it aims to keep them protected from the 'adult world', which is strongly linked to the romantic discourse idea that children must remain innocent and be protected from harm.

The puritanical discourse is also present in practice today, as education settings provide punishments and rewards, these are given to the children when they act in a certain way, two examples are, stickers are given out for good behaviour and detentions or time outs are given for bad behaviour. However, this discourse is not as prominent as the romantic and utilitarian discourses.

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