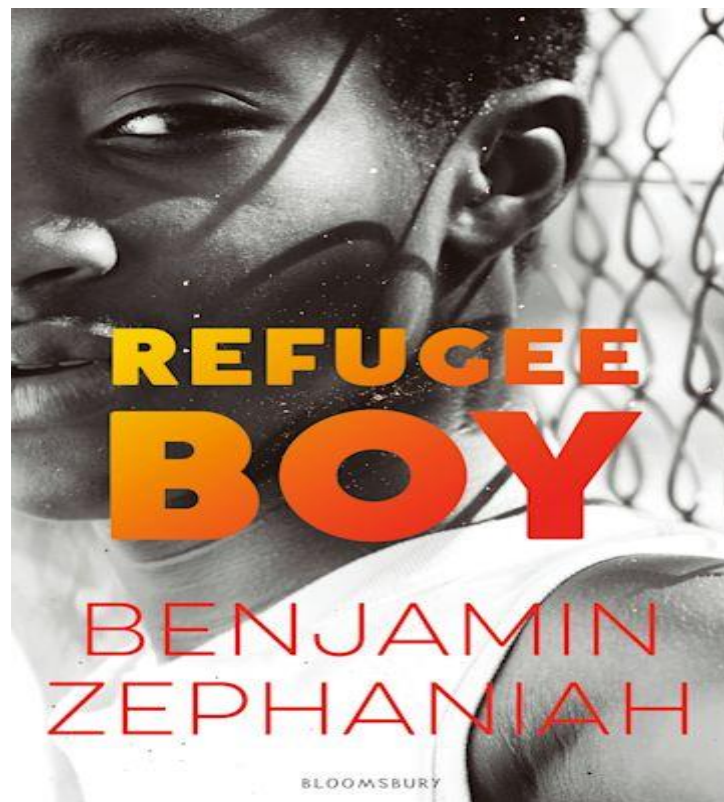


The Social Construction of Childhood: explored with reference to 'Refugee Boy' by Benjamin Zephaniah.



(Zephaniah, 2001, front cover).

The Social Construction of childhood: explored with reference to 'Refugee Boy', written by Benjamin Zephaniah.

The constructions of childhood, are extremely complex (Hyde, et al, 2010). Prout (1997) argues that childhood used to be viewed as both 'natural' and 'universal' until the introduction of the 'social notion', which describes childhood as changeable over contexts and periods, with influential social factors such as; gender, race, class, and culture. James and James (2004, p.13) equally acknowledge that childhood changes transversely between cultures and generations. Where similarly, within the field of childhood, Vygotsky (1962) highlighted the importance of culture and social context impacting a child's development. Therefore, concluding that the concept of childhood is socially constructed and varies according to the type of society a child is raised within (Coster, 2007, p.3). Reynolds (2019) argues that societal values and beliefs are reflected in children's literature at the time of writing, considering this; this assignment will explore critical historical events that have shaped the concept of childhood, before analysing the dominant discourses found in 'The Refugee Boy', published in 2001, by Benjamin Zephaniah, through the key theme of race and refugees. Before, examining the correlation between the author and the book and then finally concluding on all discussed. For the purpose of the assignment, the book 'Refugee Boy' will now be referred to as the book and the author, Benjamin Zephaniah as the author.

The Historical concept of childhood

Childhood has not always been an acknowledged concept within the British Society. Aries (1962) states in his writings, that childhood was not defined until the Middle Ages, claiming that children were seen as 'miniature adults' with no difference to adults' bar size. Aries introduced an idea of the difference, between an adult and a child that should be present, while also suggesting there is an idea of childhood (Aries, 1962, p.125). However, Pollock (1983) debates that Aries completed his work through a Western View and while his conception of childhood could not be found throughout history, it does not mean it was not regarded. Heywood (2001, 9-18) goes on further to acknowledge Aries's ideology of the term 'childhood' as not just a culturally determined concept but as a combination of cultural experience, attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of the child, delivered by the adult. Nevertheless, childhood was not perceived in a positive light within Britain during the seventeenth century, where the puritanical discourse saw children as sinful and in need of discipline, to make them good (Stone, 1977 cited in Clarke, 2010, p. 6). In addition, Firestone (1970) draws upon the idea that there was a gender disparity in the seventeenth century which saw some 'otherness' of childhood applied to boys, while girls went straight from swaddling to womanhood.

Until 1780, Britain was primarily an agricultural country, however, the industrial revolution saw families and children who had previously worked alongside one another, move to the cities to work in textile mills and mines (Tuttle, 2018). McDowall (2011, p.20), argues there was a shift in perception of children and childhood which began in the Enlightenment, where influential thinkers such as

Rousseau challenged ideas that children were evil and suggested they were born pure and innocent and corrupted by society. One of the primary factors for this change in attitudes towards children came from Rousseau's book *Emile* which was published in 1762, where the theme was that man was born good and in need of protection, where environment and education play an imperative role (Brown, 2017). Although there was a move in the discourse of childhood, it was primarily found within the upper class where parents were financially able to protect their children, which meant the poor families still relied on child labor through working in the mines and factories. Whereas, philanthropist Lord Shaftesbury reported on the horrific conditions children were working in, and although his bill to improve the conditions for the children was rejected in parliament, it was a contributing factor to the 1833 Factory Act which stated no child under 9-years-old should work in a factory and up to the age of 14-years-old no child should work more than eight hours and their time at work should be matched by schooling (Hammond et al, 2020).

Equally, Mary Carpenter (1853, p.4) was an iconic social reformer in Britain, whose work was influenced by the romantic discourse to protect children, although it is important to note that she also highlighted there are sins within some, which would be seen as a puritanical discourse. Initially, Carpenter (1851) is acknowledged for opening a ragged school for impoverished children and was astounded by the children's criminal activity and how the law enforcement was heavy on the lower classes, as upper-class parents were able to protect their children from the law more effectively. Sayeed (2018) affirms, Carpenter (1807-1877) then opened two reform schools for juveniles' delinquency and published her work, which in turn saw

parliament pass the youth offender act 1854, which meant juveniles could be sent to a reform school, instead of experiencing the same criminal justice system as adults.

The influence of the philanthropists saw society moving more toward the romantic discourse and subsequently The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act of 1889 implemented children to be treated humanely and protected (Hendrick, 1997, p. 45).

Additionally, Forster's Education Act 1870 saw more educational provisions available for children in England but it was not until 1880 that it became compulsory for children to attend school (Nutbrown, 2014, p.13). This saw the utilitarian discourse immerse in Britain, with the belief that what occurs in childhood, prepares them for adults to give back to society (Uprichard, 2008, p. 303). It is apparent, that the key influencers in constructing the British childhood we see today in the twenty-First Century, have been a result of influential literature and publishing, in the past. The dominant childhood discourse of the 21st century is the concept of the 'Global Child', where education is a human right and not a luxury but where they are innocent (Wyness, 2018, p.67). Wyness (2018) states that the 'Global Child' was constructed through powerful groups, with a significant focus on links between education and work, while the child is protected, which is the romantic discourse. Moreover, Holland (2004) states that the 'Universal Child' is a symbolic figure of attributes of innocence and vulnerability in universal childhood. Throughout history, children have been perceived in a range of ways varying from in need of nurturing and innocence, to the savage and in need of ridding of evil (Chaffin, 2006).

It is then imperative for practitioners to understand the history of childhood, and to reflect on their own experience of childhood while understanding the role of the

adult and how to protect the children they are working with from harm (Walsh, et al, 2011). Supported by policy, keeping children safe and safeguarding children, is a practitioner requirement featured in the Statutory framework for the early year's foundation stage (2021, p.9) along with the statutory reading and understanding of Keeping Children Safe in Education (2021).

The book chosen to explore childhood construct through discourses is about a 14-year-old boy, called Alem Kelo, whose mother is from Eritrea and his father from Ethiopia, and his journey of fleeing a violent civil war, to safety in London, Great Britain. Moreover, the author explores multitudes of refugees and races throughout the novel, which will be examined. The two most conflicting but powerful discourses present in the book are the puritanical and the romantic discourse, which will be analysed through the prominent theme of race and refugees. The term 'discourse' transpired from Foucault, a French philosopher whose work concentrated on gender, power, and inequalities and where a prominent idea is formed socially (Josephidou, 2020, p. 6).

Refugees and Race

Under the 1951 UN Convention, a refugee is someone who has had to flee their home and country in fear of being persecuted due to their race, religion, nationality, or membership in a political group. Furthermore, A refugee is a human being who is forced to flee their home and country from violence, oppression, or war by seeking a safe -haven elsewhere (Save the Children, 2022). At the start of the book, the

author uses two passages one named Ethiopia and one named Eritria, which are almost identical to demonstrate the conflict between the two countries and the risk to the child character Alem, for being a mixed-race child of these two countries (Zephaniah, p.1-4). The border war between these two countries, described by the author was a true reflection of what was occurring at the time of the book's publication in 2001. The border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea occurred between 1998-2000, however, it is important to note that the peace agreement between the two countries was not signed until 2018 (Tesfaye, et al, 2019).

Despite this, Child refugees in British media have been referred to as 'bogus child refugees' and 'unchildlike', which highlights Western perceptions of what a child should look like and dismisses gender and race factors of difference (McLaughlin, 2018, p.3). The same language is used by the author on the final page of the book, Alem says "I have been called a scrounger...I am not a beggar, I am not bogus" (Zephaniah, 2001,p. 284-285) reinforcing the puritanical view of refugee children, in Britain. The amendment to the UK's Immigration act 2016 saw the first lone child asylum-seekers invited into the UK. The age of the children entering the UK was immediately questioned and the children were quickly demonised as 'fake child refugees' while the media coverage changed the language of child innocence needing protection, which would be of a romantic view, to blamable adolescence (Aitken, 2001,p. 124). The media imagery portrayed the children as juvenile delinquents with hoods up and facial hair and they quickly became positioned on a 'racial scale' which positioned them as much less important, than other children, which could be seen as a move to dehumanize them (Hopkins, et al, 2010, p.139).

The author illustrates this dehumanizing of a refugee child, when the character lists all the things they are; such as a friend, a student, etc, and then says "but what am I called? A refugee." Indicating that refugee children are only seen and labelled as a refugee and nothing more about them matters (Zephaniah, 2001, 284). Tickton (2015) asserts, that gender and Race are key factors in the positioning of the predominant notions of childhood. Due to his race, the character Alem is a child who is not safe in his home country Ethiopia, this resonates with the reader, as the Romantic discourse sees children as innocent and in need of protection and is a prominent discourse in the UK today. Strengthening the correspondence with the romantic discourse, at the time the book was written in the UK, The Race Relations Act (2000) had been amended following the inquiry, of the racially motivated death of Stephen Lawrence, where it found that the police were 'systematically racist'. The amendments saw sectors for the first time, such as the immigration office, have to adhere to the antiracist discrimination, that was first introduced by the labor party in The Race Relations Act 1965. Similarly, the author amplifies ignorance within sectors devised to protect children when the judge shows little empathy and understanding of the journey Alem has undertaken not only physically but emotionally when he refers to the war as a 'dispute' and continues to minimise the war by stating that 'more people would be making their way' if it were unsafe (Zephaniah, p.231).

Race, is a prominent theme throughout the book. Race was originally thought of as biological realism but has since been defined as a social construct, however, they are both felt to intertwine with one-and- another (Andreasen, 2000). In the book, the

soldiers kick down the door and point a rifle at Alem before calling him a mongrel, for being mixed-race (Zephania, p.2). The author shows a clear puritanical discourse of attitude from the soldiers towards the child Alem, for being mixed-race of two conflicting countries. Furthermore, the author describes the appearance of Alem and his father in detail, their features, and their skin colour, but goes further to describe their ethnicity which allows the reader to understand not only their race but or their physical appearance but their nationality, heritage, culture, and ancestry (Zephania, p.10). Wiseman (2019) proclaims that reading and identifying with literature is an influential method for combating social issues such as racism, which would highlight the importance of such detail the author has written to describe the characters. The disparities between races are introduced almost instantaneously in the book. On page 5 the puritanical discourse is apparent, alongside the theme of race, when Alem is scolded by his father, for not speaking English and discouraged from speaking in his home language. In contrast, the author is quick to show Alem's innocence and naivety in the romantic discourse, when Alem shares his unfamiliarity with people of ginger hair, in addition to other races, cultures, and religions, when Alem points out that he has never seen a Sikh before and mistaken him for a priest (Zephania, p.6).

Moreover, the author shows a secure romantic discourse in the relationship between Alem and his father. The letter Mr. Kelo leaves for Alem explains that he is a loved product of two countries but as parents who value his life more than anything and who do not want him to suffer anymore, they feel it best for him to stay in England where there are emphatic services to support Alem to seek refuge from war

(Zephaniah, 2001, p. 24). This enforces the romantic view of Mr. and Mrs. Kelo to protect their child at any cost but also challenges the gender discourse around the mother typically playing the nurturing role, as it is the father who is portrayed as a caring and tender-minded parent. Bowlby (1969) founded the attachment theory but also created a culture around the mother is responsible for the nurture of a child. According to Martin (2004) characteristics and features assigned to men and women are gender stereotypes, which are prevalent in children as young as pre-school. Christov-Moore (2014) affirms that women are stereotypically perceived as more nurturing and loving and men as less emotionally available, this can lead to the perception of women and girls being more vulnerable and men and boys not in need of protection. By challenging this stereotype, the author evokes empathy toward Mr. Kelo from the reader, while emphasising his vulnerability. The following page of the book sees a stereotypical role of the male gender and a puritanical view when the hotel manager Mr. Hardwick's response to Alem's letter from his father is "well you can stay here, for another 2 nights because that is what your dad has paid for but you can't stay here forever" (Zephaniah, 2011,p. 25). Mr. Hardwick goes on to tell the ladies from the Refugee Council that "Alem's been a wonderful lad...I wish there were more like him", the author reinforces the preconceived perception of refugee boys here (Zephaniah, 2001,p. 28). The Romantic discourse is prevalent when Alem is taken to the children's home and asks Mariam from the Refugee council for protection '..will you help me if someone hurts me..'(Zephaniah, 2001, p.44). However, it was an African boy named Mustafa that protects Alem in the children's home, after being described by an adult in the home 'as a bit of a loner' (Zephaniah, 2001, p. 44). The negative language used to describe Mustafa again strengthens the

opinion of refugee boys in a puritanical view. In chapter 14 the readers learn Alem's friend Robert's parents fled from Chile and his actual name is Roberto Fernandez. A child's name represents a child's cultural identity and denial or change of name can be seen as a move to be absorbed into the dominant culture of that society, even if the child agrees to it (Kitaoka, 2020). Acknowledging this, Alem asks Robert why he has changed his name "I don't know..it wasn't my idea..my dad said our roots are still Chilean but we would fit in better if we changed our names a little," (Zephaniah, 2001, p. 170). The author demonstrates the need to conform to society and emphasises it further when the character Robert goes on to say " don't be shocked, I know a Birinder called Bernie, an Anula called Ann, a Rajinder called Ray.." (Zephaniah, 2001, p.171). Moreover, Khosravi (2011) asserts that names carry strong religious and cultural ties and by immigrants changing their name to a 'neutral' or European name, their transition and integration into society will be more successful. On the contrary, acceptance, and support of a child's name in a school setting, assures a diverse welcoming environment, that affirms a child's identity (Keller, et al, 201, p. 178).

The romantic discourse is strongly prevalent when the author writes about the interactions between Alem and the foster family The Fitzgeralds. Mrs. Fitzgerald does fit with the stereotypical view as the nurturing female figure and indirectly tells Alem he is loved by them '.. remember, there's a lot of people who love you' (Zephaniah, 2001,p. 203). The author portrays Alem as an innocent refugee in need of protection, not only in his own country but also from prejudice, preconceptions, and systems in Britain.

While the universal politics behind child asylum seekers, see them as innocent victims, it is suggested that British politics see undocumented child migrants as criminals and demonise them (McLaughlin, 2018, p.4). This alludes, to child refugees and asylum seekers who are given protection, in a fragile realm within the 'secure zone of childhood' (Leifsen, 2013). Additionally, Dumas (2016) argues that many researchers have highlighted concerns around black boys being criminalised and adultified, which may suggest the lack of the romantic discourse when considering black refugee boys. Given this, Berstein (2011, 2017) claims that 'Innocence' has been a concept defined by race and gender, constructed historically in the Western Culture exclusively, where only white children are allowed to be innocent.

The author introduces the reader to many characters from a range of ethnicities and cultures throughout the book. In support of this, Smith-D'Arezzo (2003) argues that characters can be used to introduce children to a wide range of cultures but is equally a way for educators to initiate exploration and understanding of race, culture, and ethnicity to the children they teach. Like Alem, the author Benjamin Zephaniah is of mixed heritage, his mother is Jamaican, and his father Bajan. Zephaniah acknowledges that politically he is British but culturally feels African (Doumerc, 2004). Hollindale (1988, p.15) states that authors bring themselves and the world around them to the book and their readers, which is apparent with the author and book. However, Sands O'Connor (2004) proclaims the importance of evading correlation between the reader of the novel and that of the protagonist in

an ethnically or racially manner and instead advocates for the exploration of how the author represents race and ethnicity within the novel and if the reader can relate to the humanity of the characters. With that in mind, UNICEF has funded research into the power of children's literature and the teaching of the developing world and found that children's literature is a powerful tool for global education (Diakiw, 1990). Additionally, Hope (2008) acknowledges that there has been a shift in children's literature around refugees from a historical perspective, to that of a modern one, which is more relatable to the 21st-century child reader.

After considering all that has been discussed, it is evident that key historical events have significantly contributed to the ideological discourses, which dominate how childhood constructions continue and children require a level of protection.

Analysing the prevalent discourses, Romantic and Puritanical, found in 'Refugee Boy' by Benjamin Zephaniah showed a clear correlation to the dominant social discourses found today in Britain. Legislation is pivotal to protect children in the romantic discourse but equally from a puritanical view. Practitioners have a statutory requirement to keep children safe in education by having read and understood the Keeping Children Safe in Education part 1 policy and abiding by the EYFS framework around safeguarding the children in their care. In addition, a practitioner must follow the school's Equality and Diversity policy which is a legal requirement, which

promotes the understanding and valuing of all the children, families, and community, adapted from the Equality Act 2010 (Equality Act, 2010). However, the puritanical discourse can be found in protective institutes such as a school, where policy supports sanctions for a child who has not followed the setting's rules or expectations. Furthermore, OFSTED (2021) inspect and grade schools on their behaviour management and control.

Children's literature is a powerful tool that teaches children about race and culture and for children to identify with characters and is also a way for educators to create the platform for this to happen (Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003). With this in mind, practitioners must carefully select literature that not only reflects their student's diverse backgrounds but also ensure that there is a variety of cultural knowledge for all their students. Moreover, educators need a secure understanding of the subliminal messages of multiculturalism, being delivered through children's literature and the power it holds to tackle social issues such as the puritanical view of refugee boys of colour and evokes empathy for others. Children's literature has the potential to universalise 'stories of people', in a way to inform globally by offering a cultural understanding and allowing people to consider all in humanity such as; race, gender, class, the human, and the world.

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