

## **An Exploration of Dual Identity in Gene Luen Yang's 'American Born Chinese'**

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"“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them”

- **Genesis 1:7 (NIV)**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims at investigating the challenges of being a double minority and the impact of societal expectations on their sense of self in Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel, *"American Born Chinese,"* exploring the themes of identity, racism, and discrimination prevalent within the narrative. Distinguishing novels from graphic novels, the study emphasizes the unique storytelling method of graphic novels, utilizing pictures with dialogue bubbles to convey complex and specific stories. The discussion centers on the novel's three interconnected stories featuring a monkey deity, Jin Wang, a Chinese boy facing bullying, and an American authentically Chinese individual named Jin Wang, addresses the issue of racism, particularly focusing on the superiority of white society and the stereotypes associated with the Chinese in American society, the *Post-colonialism* theory by Robert J. C. Young (2001) was used in the analysis. As a result: **1) Racism as the Central Theme:** The racism is the central and overarching theme of the graphic novel. It explores how the narrative effectively portrays instances of racial discrimination and stereotypes, particularly focusing on the superiority of white supremacy and the negative perceptions associated with the Chinese in American society. **2) Impact on Identity:** it shows the profound impact of racism on identity, emphasizing the challenges faced by the characters, especially Jin Wang, as a double minority; the struggles of being an American-born Chinese with a different belief system (Confucianism) and **3) It eventually shows the character's identity reconstruction rather than a manifestation of identity crisis.** The narrative encourages readers to reflect on the negative impact of racism, discrimination, and the importance of embracing one's true identity. Ultimately, the analysis serves as both an educational tool and a critique of societal issues, promoting empathy and understanding in the face of adversity.

**Keyword:** *american born chinese, diaspora, graphic novel, hybrid identity, identity crisis, post-colonialism*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Novel is one of the literary works that people write and make to describe some kind of characters, action and something like that. Novels are something that have been around for a long time and a novel is a narrative work of prose fiction that tells a story about specific human experiences or some novel also

has a purpose of entertaining the reader or telling an event that happens. But novels are different from graphic novels. A graphic novel is a book made up of comics with entertainment content in it. Graphic novels are a little bit different from novels. They use pictures with dialogue bubbles and narration boxes to help the reader understand the story easily. Graphic novels have become popular because of the intricate graphics, technique of coloring, panels and bubbles that look like comics. What makes Graphic novels unique is the stories are more specific, and complex, containing not only pages, but also colored graphics; on the other hand, novels have a lot of pages, can be up to hundreds. The graphic novel that is discussed in this study, *"American Born Chinese"* unveils the issue of racism that is going on among the Chinese and American people. This novel was created in 2006 and was created by a famous writer named Gene Luen Yang.

Upon analyzing the graphic novel, *"American Born Chinese"* combines together three interconnected stories. First, there's the Monkey King trying to fit in but facing rejection because he is different. Then, followed by Jin Wang, a Chinese-American kid dealing with bullies and trying to be true to himself at a new school. Lastly, there's Danny, who pretends to be someone else to avoid embarrassment because of his Chinese cousin. As the stories come together, the book talks about how the characters deal with problems like racism and feeling like they have to fit in.

In this study, the selected graphics and narratives that are related to the issue, analyzed in literary criticism lens: colonial and *Post-colonialism* theory by Robert J. C. Young (2001) to understand how these pictures and stories talk about identity, self-perception, and cultural interactions. By using Young's ideas, the small details and judgments in these stories and pictures and how they relate to colonial thinking are unveiled as well as to understand more about complex issues in literature and post-colonial thoughts related to the present day issue of racism and discrimination.

Therefore, the expectation is to uncover nuanced details within the selected material, revealing how these narratives contribute to our understanding of hybrid identity, and cultural interactions. The analysis seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the chosen graphics and narratives, contributing to more comprehensive issues in the lens of literature and *post-colonial* thought. The binary opposition is made to compare and contrast the conflict issue in the story as follows:

Bin

**Binary Opposition**

WHITE SUPREMACY	CHINESE MINORITY
Throughout the story, the superiority of the white American can be seen when Jin Wang, the main character, faces discrimination and racism. <i>"White supremacy is not just a matter of individual beliefs"</i>	Jin Wang feels isolated and tries hard to fit in with the expectations of American society, trying to change his hairstyle and haircolor. <i>"Hybrid identity is a product of the globalized,</i>

or attitudes, but a system of power relations that operates through institutions, cultural representations, and everyday practices." (Young, R. J. C.,2010)

postcolonial world, where cultural and social interactions are increasingly complex and multifaceted. It challenges essentialist notions of identity and highlights the importance of acknowledging the diverse and interconnected nature of human experiences." (Young, R. J. C.,2010)

## METHOD

Upon the data analyzed, a qualitative method was used to explain, describe the issue in the story. *"Qualitative research is an approach to the study of human behavior that emphasizes depth of understanding over breadth of observation, and that seeks to describe social or human phenomena in terms of the meanings that people attach to them."* (Creswell, 2013, p. 17) The data of graphics and texts were selected and presented as evidence; meanwhile, the Post-colonialism theory by Robert J. C. Young (2001) was used to examine the critical issue as shown in the binary opposition found in the story. *"Postcolonial criticism, then, is a critical practice that seeks to understand the cultural and intellectual consequences of colonization, and the ways in which these have been resisted, subverted, or incorporated into the cultures of the colonized."* (Young, 1990, p. 11) This analysis provides the cause and effect, past and present perspectives as the impacts of post-colonization. In addition, how the graphics were illustrated was also analyzed as the graphic novel uses pictures to help visualize the social condition of the story. The Postcolonialism approach discussed several aspects that were narrowed to hybridity, identity and white supremacy,

## DISCUSSION

This graphic novel contains three stories that tells about a monkey who is a deity, Jin Wang, a Chinese boy that is bullied and an American that is a very authentic Chinese, Jin Wang who likes a girl named Amelia. The story starts with the illustration of Jin Wang's childhood's storytelling and in his imagination appears deities that his mom used to tell. The excerpt from the graphic novel serves as a vibrant and dynamic illustration of visual narrative,



captivating viewers on various fronts. Employing a first-person viewpoint, vivid hues, and a diverse array of textual elements, it effectively communicates the narrator's dual identity as a Chinese-American adolescent. Audiences can connect with the narrator's blend of humor and emotion, while also gaining insights into his cultural and personal hurdles. Moreover, the graphic novel instills a feeling of movement





and cadence by incorporating a variety of panel sizes, bubbles and shapes, along with integrating sound effects and dialogue. This segment from the graphic novel delivers a captivating and unforgettable narrative that appeals to both the visual perception and cognitive processing of the audience.

At school, the only Asian looking classmate that he sees is only Suzy Nakamura. This graphic excerpt is a simple and cartoonish example of visual storytelling that contrasts the serious and realistic issues of being an American born Chinese. It uses a third-person perspective, minimal colors, and varied textual elements to convey the cultural and linguistic diversity, the background information, and the meaningful message of the three different characters who are connected by a common theme. The girl shown in between looks so pale that is contrary to the boys. It helps tell the audience the social issue occurring, living as a minority in a dominant community.



On Jin's part, he often feels different among the others, "*I'm not Chinese enough for them, and I'm not American enough for these guys.*" (Yang, 2006, p. 120) This quote highlights the protagonist Jin's feelings of not fitting in with either his Chinese heritage or his American upbringing, showcasing the theme of hybrid identity and he



starts to change his looks into the people's dominant hair look by changing his hairstyle and dyeing his hair blond instead of Chinese. His hair looks curly that shocks his friends imitating Greg's hairstyle (*An American Friend*) so that he is confident. "*Postcolonial theory is concerned with the ways in which the cultures of the colonized have been shaped by their experiences of colonization and how they have responded to it.*" (Young, 2001, p. 2). It emphasizes the importance of understanding the impact of the

legacy of colonization on the colonized, leaving the superiority of the dominant society that aligns the experiences of Jin in his community. The social dynamics within the school setting and broader American society in the novel highlight power imbalances and stereotypes.



(Gene, 2006: 98)

The funny comic strip style is a way of telling a story with humor and making fun of the ideas people might have about being Chinese-American. It uses funny drawings, differences in how things look,

talking, and writing to show the clash between Chinese and American ways. The story is about Jin Wang, who tries hard to be like his American friends and does not want to be Chinese. There is also another



(Gene, 2006: 198)

character, Danny, who loses himself by trying to be someone he is not. The story brings in Cousin Chin-Kee, who represents all the bad stereotypes about Chinese people and makes fun of Jin Wang and Danny. This picture depicts the character's situation, a message about things not being as they seem and being okay with who you are. "The whites providing the norm from which all others were regarded as deviations, meant that the fine discriminations made between shades of difference of the different varieties of humans characteristics," (Young, 2005:115). This quote suggests that in a society where the norm or standard is

set by the white population, all other racial or ethnic groups are seen as deviations from this norm. The phrase "fine discriminations" implies that subtle distinctions and judgments are made based on the differences in various human characteristics among different racial and ethnic groups. Essentially, it highlights a system where the standards are biased towards whiteness, leading to the categorization and evaluation of other groups as deviations from this perceived norm. It clearly shows dominance of the distinction between the whites and other races. "Hybridity, then, is not a matter of a simple fusion or mixing of cultures but of the complex interplay between different cultural forms." (Young, 1995, p. 106) This quote illustrates the complexity of hybrid identities, which can be related to Jin's struggle to reconcile his Chinese and American identities in "American Born Chinese."



(Gene, 2006: 48)



(Gene, 2006: 49)

There are also pictures of bullying the Chinese people. They draw ChinKee in yellow skin color and with rabbit teeth. The illustration depicts the behaviors and characteristics of the Chinese in America but the first part of the story is represented by the animals which are similar to the story of a monkey king that is considered weak because he is a monkey by other kings but is also a strong fighter. Each part correlates to the life of Chinese people struggling in American society. Just because the monkey king is in a place where people do not accept and no one is also a monkey like the monkey

king, people do not want to accept him to be in the society. It resembles the discrimination that happens frequently in Chinese American society as depicted in this novel.

Stereotyping oftentimes distorts characteristics of both the dominance and the minority. the portrayals of Jin's classmates are smarter, active, good-looking, more modern, more well-liked, more acknowledged, have more recognition, etc; meanwhile, more specifically, Chinese in American society often get stereotyped less smart, passive, fair (yellow & pale skin), primitive, less liked, less

acknowledged, have less recognition, etc. This issue may relate to everyday life issues like depicted in the monkey king story when he is going to a party with all the most important people coming to this party but the people do not accept him because of that the party is turning into chaos because of the traits of the monkey king. *"Postcolonialists have to be concerned with the ways in which the cultures of the colonized have been shaped by their experiences of colonization and how they have responded to it."* (Young, 2001, p. 2) Young emphasizes the importance of understanding the experiences of the colonized due to the legacy of the distinction of social status in the past and their responses now, which can be applied to the themes of isolation and discrimination as faced by Jin in *"American Born Chinese."* The discrimination of being a person with a yellow skin tone, may be sensitive to Jin's friend who is a Japanese with a similar appearance. Young (2005:8), *"Racism is not instinctive, but learnt."* It means in a society people learn the stuff from their society or even family and friends. Furthermore, the story also tells a part of when other people do the racism and it makes everyone do the same way to the Chinese, Asian or people that have a different skin color, appearance and other things that are different from them. Young (2005:26), *"The nightmare of ideologies and categories of racism continue to repeat upon the living."* Another portrait shows a girl with an American that has a very inappropriate Chinese representation and looks very smart, but has different eyes, clothing style and also has an annoying behavior of being too friendly with most of the people that most of the Americans hate and think about all of the Chinese people. The whole school bullies the Chinese student and also does not want to be a friend of the Chinese student, even one of the respected American teachers in this school appears to be bullying the Chinese student. It manifests only to some students who want to be friends with Chinese students. When another Chinese student comes to the school and that Chinese student also gets bullied and treated the same as the previous Chinese student; this also happens to those who have a different personality and character. The racism depicted in this graphic novel is happening in American society. The main characters in this story face the society's expectation to look like or to behave like Americans so that they can be treated the same way like the other Americans.

This comic strip style is a dramatic and suspenseful example of visual storytelling that reveals a plot twist in the story of being an American born Chinese. It uses repetition and alignment, dialogue and captions, and black shirts and plain backgrounds to



create a strong visual impact and a sense of unity among the characters. The comic strip shows the climax of the story, where Danny, Jin Wang's alter ego who tries to pass as a white American, discovers that he is actually Jin Wang, the Chinese-American teenager who rejects his Chinese heritage. This conveys a message of conflict and resolution. In the end, the main characters manage to fit in society with the people that are bullying and discriminating against them by proving that the main characters are also as fine as



the other people, cool and are equal like his friends that often bully for having different appearance. Social identity reconstruction occurs when Jin decides to change his appearance back to his Chinese look and accepts his true self.

## CONCLUSION

Having the story analyzed, it can be concluded that the main issue of the story is racism; discrimination and also some other problems that may happen in our lives. This story also has a very deep meaning for us to understand like the story uses a monkey to describe and mimic the issue that has been happening around the world and also wants to tell us to not be racist, discriminating or doing bad things to other people. Besides, it also describes the sadness and loneliness of the person, how as an American born Chinese, he is a double minority who often gets rejected by the society in the novel. Being a minority as a Chinese; on the other hand, he has a different belief (*Confucianism*). In the end of the story, Jin Wang knows his true identity and he tries to be himself without changing his looks just to impress someone he likes. It means that the identity crisis does not manifest; instead, identity reconstruction occurs. Lastly, this analysis is done to educate as well as to criticize racism and to tell how bad the impact of bullying or discriminating against someone is.

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