

Racism through the BAME protagonists in *Ichiro* and *The Hate U Give*

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Abstract

This article is going to analyse how black and minority ethnic (BAME) characters are represented in two modern children's books, *Ichiro* by Inzana Ryan and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. In *Ichiro*, the basic and incontrovertible fact that Asian people are usually discriminated against because of their physical features and how negative stereotypes against people of other races are constructed are demonstrated with detailed pictures. In *The Hate U Give* (THUG), on the other hand, white people's total ignorance about racial issues is firmly described through the black protagonist Starr's subjective perspective. At the same time, those personal remarks also displayed black people's extreme biased beliefs against white people. By demonstrating the two distinct dimensions of both the white and black community, THUG succeeded in identifying the real-world issues between people of the two races. These two children's books approached the complex, sensitive and controversial social issues in great detail and pointed out the cruel truth. Increasing the number of children's books tackling racism and reflecting the reality of minority groups is urgently needed.

Key words: BAME • Racism • Children's literature • Minority groups • Japan

Introduction

'Chon-chon, China man.' A white, blond British man in a group of five or six suddenly said this and was obviously making fun of me when I was just walking on campus. That was the first time ever in my life that I was discriminated by my race; but it is no surprise given the fact that Japan, my home country, is a homogenous country where 97.8 percent of the population is Japanese and only 1.4 percent is non-Japanese in which most of them are Asian such as Chinese or Korean (Sekai no tokei 2019, p. 42). In contrast, the United Kingdom is slightly more diverse. According to the UK government (2018), the census conducted in 2011 revealed that 80.5 percent of the population in England and Wales was white British, 4.4 percent was other white, and the rest was non-white including Asian, Black, mixed race and so on. Despite the subtle difference in ratio, it can be said that one race group is dominant in both countries; in this case, Asian in Japan and white in the UK. The point is that this dominance has raised racism at an alarming rate in both countries.

Park (2017) says 'racism is one of Japan's gravest social problems' due to the fact that a great number of Japanese people have been trying to expel Koreans living in Japan. In 2007, *Zainichitokken wo yurusanai shimin no kai* known as 'Zaitokukai' (which translates to 'Citizens against the privilege of Koreans in Japan') was established and the number of members reached over 15,000 within a decade. This Zaitokukai has used demonstrations and hate speeches to appeal to the society that those Koreans do not have the entitlement to live in the country. However, the problem is that not only the members of this group but also many other Japanese people seem to have a negative opinion towards Korean residents and that is why Japan is sometimes considered as a racist country. Besides Asian minorities, there is another type of racism against Westerners. Banzai and Wang (2007) pointed out that Japanese people preferred Western white people to other foreigners, especially those who have blue eyes and blond hair. A large number of Japanese people think white people are superior to themselves as far as appearance is concerned. One possible reason for this could be because, 'Japanese people have comforted themselves with the thought that racial issues are only ones between "whites" and "blacks" in such countries as the United States and South Africa' (Iwabuchi & Takezawa, 2015). Japan's unique homogeneity has made people indifferent to those issues and this fixed mindset is quite dangerous and needs to be diminished; otherwise, white supremacy is going to be enhanced not by white people but by coloured people.

Speaking of Britain, Booth (2019) explains racism is on the rise there as well. The percentage of ethnic minorities who have faced racial discrimination increased from 58 percent in 2016 to 76 percent in 2019. 'People saw racism on social media on a day-to-day basis' (Booth, 2019). 71,251 racially motivated crimes were recorded in 2018 (Booth, 2019). Considering the significant change in percentage and this unneglectable number of crimes, there are an increasing number of people suffering from racial discrimination in the UK. NatCen Social Research has done a survey measuring people's self-awareness of racism since 1983. One of the questions in this survey has been, 'How would you describe yourself... prejudiced OR not prejudiced against people of other races?' The latest result in 2017 showed that 74 percent of all participants answered, 'Not prejudiced at all', 25 percent said, 'A little prejudiced' and 1 percent admitted they were 'Very prejudiced' (Kelley et al., 2017). That is to say, a fourth of the people living in this country have some level of prejudice toward people of other races. They emphasized that this percentage 'has never fallen below 25%' since the survey was commenced which could possibly mean that little progress has been made towards the aim of eliminating racism.

There could be multiple reasons why racism still exists to a great extent even in highly developed countries such as Japan and the UK. Firstly, Taylor and Muir (2014) note that the 9/11 attack and the invasion of Afghanistan might have caused the following year's dramatic rise of self-reported racism. It is assumed that people associated Islamic people with terrorism or danger after the attack occurred. Secondly, the media often involves racially discriminated images either implicitly or explicitly which lead viewers to gain unconscious stereotypes. Kulaszewicz (2015) identifies that the dominance of

white people in the entertainment industry in the US is causing the improper portrayal of black people. BBC News (2018) broadcasted the ignorance of racial issues in Japan by picking up the news about a popular Japanese TV show in which a famous comedian painted his face in black to get a laugh. The media has a powerful impact on human cognition. Thirdly, the absence of diversity in terms of races in children's literature need to be recognized more widely and has to be addressed with regard to its dramatic influences upon children's behaviour (Coats, 2017). As stated by Nikolajeva (2013), theory of mind, or the ability to understand other people's feelings or thoughts, is supposed to be gradually developed through the experience of reading books. Therefore, it could be said that the more diverse books children read, the less biased adults they would become. Lysaker and Sedberry (2015) add, 'By reading picture books that deal with the ways in which certain groups are positioned, teachers can engage students in considering races and cultures unlike their own and encourage them to think about what it might be like to be someone from those races and cultures.' However, against the fact that the significance of representation in children's literature is officially confirmed, it turned out that only a few BAME characters are present in those books in reality. In 2018, only 4 percent of all children's books published in the UK focused on ethnic minority characters (Serroukh et al, 2018). What's worse is that there is a considerable disparity in the way white and black characters are represented. For example, Serroukh (2018) affirms, 'The more virtuous the character, the lighter their complexion.' The great inequality given to children from ethnic minority backgrounds is conspicuous.

Following the previous discoveries about racial issues and the representation of BAME characters in children's literature, this article is going to look more closely at how those minority characters are positioned in the two books, *Ichiro* by Ryan Inzana (2012) and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017). Since both books are written by American writers and have roots in the US, some information about racial issues and children's literature in the US is going to be introduced before the analysis.

Statistical Atlas (2018) shows that over sixty percent of the US population is white and less than forty percent is other ethnicities. Despite the fact that white people form a majority in the US as well as the UK, the proportion shows that the United States is much more diverse than the United Kingdom with regard to races. Besides, according to the data from Statista (Duffin, 2019), it is expected that white people will no longer be the majority in the US by 2060. However, overt racism surely exists in the US. More than eighty percent of white Americans say there is discrimination against people of races other than their own (National Public Radio, 2017) and about a half of African Americans say they have experienced some extent of discrimination such as slurs or violence because of their race (National Public Radio, 2017). When it comes to the representation of ethnic minorities in children's books in the US, less than thirty percent of books collected by Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) in 2018 involved non-white characters (School of Education, 2019). The situation is not as bad as the UK because of its higher percentage, but the percentage of diverse representation is not high enough given ethnic minorities account for nearly forty percent of the population in the country (Statistical Atlas, 2018).

***Ichiro* by Ryan Inzana**

Ichiro is a graphic novel similar to Japanese Manga, but the size is bigger and a different format is used. Japanese books are read from right to left but this one is written in the English way, that is from left to right. Due to the limited amount of information, not many things were discovered about the author but Inzana is an American illustrator and comic artist who graduated from a private university in Brooklyn, New York (The Nation, no date) where Ichiro, the protagonist of the novel lives. The story begins when Ichiro and his mother are moving back to Japan after a long time living in the US because of his Japanese mother's job. Since Ichiro's American father was killed during the war and his mother needed her own time to hunt for jobs, Ichiro's grandfather (on his mother's side), Mr. Sato, took care of him and took him on to a trip to visit some Japanese historical sites. A great deal of Japanese culture, history and social context is taught by his grandfather; this is illustrated not only by depicting the landscape of Japan but also the food, people's behaviour, and Ichiro's reaction to cultural differences. Ichiro experiences some discrimination and gets humiliated mainly due to his spoken language and non-Japanese like behaviour throughout the story. Besides, Ichiro himself seems to have some stereotypes against people of a specific race.

***The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas**

The Hate U Give (THUG) is a young adult novel written by Angie Thomas, an African American author. The story is told from a first-person perspective by sixteen-year-old Starr, a black American girl and the protagonist of the story. She lives with her father Maverick, mother Lisa, and young brother Sekani in a place called Garden Heights where almost all of the residents are poor black people and gangster fights often occur. On the other hand, the private school she attends is in a quiet and peaceful place where predominantly affluent white people live. To adapt to these two delicate and extraordinary situations, she needs to change her characteristics depending on where she is and who she is with and that makes her exhausted all the time. Her life starts to dramatically change after her close friend Khalil is killed by a white police officer. Society tries to find Khalil's fault rather than blaming the policeman; her family fails to understand Starr's true feelings; and white people ignore racial issues. After facing all these hardships, Starr becomes stronger, more brave and finally stands up as the only witness of the shooting.

Being half-American and half-Japanese in America/Japan

In this graphic novel, there are four scenes where Ichiro faces discrimination.

Asian = Chinky eyes?

Black man: 'Damn! All up in my way like you don't see me! Must be them lil' chink-ee eyes you got, lady...'

White man: 'Could blind her wit' dental floss, son! Hee-hee!'

This was not technically directed at Ichiro but at his mother. As a matter of fact, narrow eyes are part of the physical characteristics of East Asian people and are often used as a tool to discriminate against them, by making slant-eyes for instance. There are numerous such cases which cause serious accusations; one of the recent cases was in 2018 when the hosts of a US-based Spanish TV show were suspended for making a slanted eyes gesture (The Guardian sport, 2018). Ichiro's mother was patently stressed out but only took Ichiro with her to the rear car so that they could avoid these two men. Especially in the case when one is physically inferior to the person being offensive, they often choose not to talk back and just remain silent even though they want to. This time, both the black and white men were visibly taller and bigger than the mother so there was nothing she could do but leave.

War and racism

Ichiro: 'Over there. I think he's a terrorist.'

Ichiro suddenly told his mother that the guy sitting on the other side of them and wearing a turban was a terrorist. Why Ichiro thought this immediately after seeing somebody who did not do anything but wear a turban turned out to be due to his grandfather's (on his father's side) influence. Once when Ichiro was shopping with his Grandpa Benny, his grandfather found fault with a shop staff wearing a turban and said, 'My son – this boy's father fought and died so people like you could be free. So you could come to this country and own a store.' He then shouted at a police officer, 'Should be arrest'n him! Guy's probably a terrorist!' Obviously, this experience made Ichiro have a racially stereotypical image against people wearing turbans. These descriptions appear to be indicating that war resulted in many people's hatred toward people of other races and that exaggerated or prejudiced sentiments have been passed down to the future generation.

Stereotypes from a lack of understanding

When Ichiro arrived at his grandfather's house in Japan's countryside, one of his neighbours, Mrs. Wataya, came to talk to them. She is a typical Japanese elderly person who does not have positive ideas about non-Japanese people. Again, Japan is a racially homogeneous country so people, especially older ones, are very ignorant about other

cultures. Thus, it is not unusual when she said, ‘Your daughter married a Foreigner...’ with an unpleasant facial expression, though Ichiro doesn’t look like he likes her remark. It may be because he felt his father, who he respects the most, was insulted or partly because he felt the sense of exclusion by the word ‘Foreigner’. In general, Japanese people tend to categorize people who do not speak proper Japanese language or who do not look Japanese as aliens. Therefore, Mrs. Wataya later unintentionally associates Ichiro’s unfamiliar behaviour with Americanness by saying, ‘Americans are so strange!’ But this assumption which stems from a lack of knowledge has the potential to harm someone and it is presumably one of the roots of racism.

Discrimination and language in Japan

One day, his grandfather takes Ichiro to the bay to fish in spite of his disinterest. Here he encounters temporary bullying by a group of boys who are around the same age as Ichiro.

One of the boys: ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

Ichiro: ‘Huh? What did you say? I didn’t understand...’

Boy A: ‘His Japanese sucks! What an idiot.’

Boy B: ‘I said – what—are— you—doing—here, you—stupid—
Foreigner!’

Ichiro: ‘I’m not stupid! I just can’t understand your dumb accent!’

Boy B: ‘Accent?! His Japanese sounds like a dog barking!’

Ichiro: ‘Shut up.’

Boy B: ‘You’re trespassing... Can’t you see the sign!’

(A sign says: ‘No dogs’)

Ichiro: ‘You best stop or I’m gonna...’

Boy A: ‘What’s this crazy Foreigner saying?’

Boy B: ‘All I hear is WOOF-WOOF-WOOF!’

Ikeda and Yamazaki (1983) argue that Japanese returnees are likely to have language proficiency issues because of the limited opportunity to practice Japanese and the necessity of handling another language at the same time. Ichiro is not an exception and it is estimated that his Japanese language level is relatively low compared to his fluency in English. Living in Japan without being able to speak Japanese properly is quite hard. In fact, a lot of returnees are regarded as abnormal; therefore, many of them are bullied (Nakamura, 2018) just the way Ichiro is by the three boys. Needless to say, bullying or treating somebody unequally just because they do not speak the language well is not

acceptable, but it happens in this homogenous country and the reality is illustrated very well by Inzana in this scene.

Being black in America

‘You think I’m a racist? Really?’

White people’s ignorance about racial issues is strongly emphasized in this book. Hailey, a friend of Starr’s from Williamson prep, is a typical example. When they were playing basketball together, Hailey said to Starr, ‘Hustle! Pretend the ball is some fried chicken. Bet you’ll stay on it then.’ without knowing that linking black people with fried chicken was a taboo thing to do. Furthermore, Maya, another friend of Starr’s and ethnically Chinese, was asked by Hailey if she ate a cat on Thanksgiving Day because she was Chinese. Both Starr and Maya were seriously hurt because of her careless speech though Hailey herself was totally ignorant. (‘You think I was being racist?’, ‘That was so long ago!’, ‘It was only a joke!’ etc.). On the other hand, Chris, Starr’s white boyfriend, never says something offensive to either Starr or Maya, but still is labelled as a racially ignorant white person. Whilst Starr was having a serious mental breakdown, he did not seem to understand what she was suffering from. (Starr: ‘You’re white, okay? You’re white!’ Chris: ‘What the fuck’s that got to do with anything?’). Given those two white people’s description, it can be said that there are a number of white people who do not know what racism is, what makes minority people suffer and how those people feel. Despite the fact that Hailey did not change until the end, Chris eventually could sense how Starr was feeling when he ended up being the only white person in Starr’s black community. Ideally, experiencing being a minority would be the best way to let majority people think about racial issues, but it is not actually probable. In this respect, children’s books could be one of the greatest tools to make this possible.

‘Why does it always have to be about racism with you?’

Kenya: ‘You’re so lucky you go to that white-people school and don’t have to deal with hoes like that.’

Chance: ‘White kids love popping pills.’

Bianca: ‘And listening to Taylor Swift.’

Having looked at the speech or conversation among black characters, most of the people turned out to have some stereotypes or fixed ideas against white people. Some of them seem to have a point, some of them do not. The point is that it’s a strong feeling of hatred. Sekani was no longer able to hang out with his neighbourhood kids after he was called ‘white boy’. Maverick was utterly mad when he found out that Starr was dating a

white boy. Starr has her own definition of white people and clearly distinguishes black and white people by saying, 'White people assume...', 'White people are...' etc. Besides, black people regularly differentiate white and black people by their taste of fashion and music: 'White boys wear Converse and Vans, not J's.' Coats (2017) explains that, 'Oppressed and underrepresented people groups tend to have a strong sense of their corporate identity... value their history and language as an ongoing legacy, and perceive harm to one person as an affront to all.' As proof, there are a lot of black civil rights leaders, politicians and celebrities mentioned throughout the story such as Dr. King or Huey Newton. Plus, the black characters frequently support athletes, musician, actors, or anyone who are from the same race background. One thing noticeable here is that the awareness of differences about races between black and white people is absolutely huge. An enormous number of black people feel they have been discriminated against and have an excessive hatred towards white people whereas a limited number of white people seem to know how black people are feeling. A balance needs to be struck.

Conclusion

The latest studies indicate that racism has been on the rise or at least has not declined even in highly developed countries such as Japan, the UK and the US. Each country has its peculiar situation in terms of racial issues. Japan, for example, has two types of racism, one is against other ethnic Asians and another is against Westerners. Its unique history and isolation from the continent created distaste for Korean residents living in Japan in a considerable number of Japanese people's mind. However, as far as Western people are concerned, they are rather likely to have a positive opinion and admire their physical features. Without a doubt, the former discrimination is not forgivable, but the latter existing stereotype is also extremely risky in consideration of spreading white privilege. In the United Kingdom and the United States, in contrast, white people are the majority and ethnic minority groups account for only a small proportion of the entire population. One of the most serious social issues in these countries is racism by white people against non-white people. In order to solve this problem, the importance and powerful influence of children's literature has to be considered. Having looked at *Ichiro* by Ryan Inzana and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, various and typical types of racism and discrimination were revealed. *Ichiro's* experiences of facing discrimination due to his mother's narrow eyes, his own racist speech, an elderly person's attitude against foreigners, and people's reaction to his clumsy Japanese showed the type of racism which Asian people are likely to experience. The book also shows how racial stereotypes succeed, how dangerous knowing nothing about other cultures is, and the type of discrimination often seen in Japan. In *THUG*, in addition to the fact that black people are fiercely discriminated against physically and mentally both in the past and the present, the substantial gap between white people's indifference to racial issues and black people's fury against them are vividly depicted in the conversations among black characters. Both books are entirely worthy given they put BAME characters in the

centre of the story and tackle racial issues. Encouraging children to read a racially rich variety of books regardless of their own race will be an effective solution to this problem.

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