

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AS PORTRAYED IN *MY NAME IS YOON* AND *YOON AND THE CHRISTMAS MITTEN*

Kristin Marwinda

e-mail: marwindakristin@gmail.com

Magister Ilmu Susastra Universitas Diponegoro Semarang

ABSTRACT

The topic of cultural differences in picture books can be used as a medium for school-age children to understand more about the condition of immigrant children in America. "Through picture books about immigrants, nonimmigrant children can learn about the immigrant experience (Johnson and Smith, 1993) and be exposed to different cultures in the social studies classroom" (Lamme, Linda, et al., 2004: 123). This issue becomes very interesting to be analyzed because the readers will get more understanding on how immigrant children face several cultural differences in America, especially on how they develop their identity. The purpose of this study is to analyze the identity development of immigrant children in America as portrayed in Yoon character in the picture books by Helen Recorvits. As a Korean girl who moves to America, Yoon has to adapt and adjust with new different environment. The method of this study is descriptive qualitative based on the library research. This paper uses sociological approach to analyze the story of Yoon in the picture books. The result of this study shows that Yoon has experienced adjustment and acculturation during her adaptation to American culture. She has gradually undergone a change of identity, which is from a Korean girl to be an Asian-American.

Keywords: picture books, immigrant children, adjustment, identity development

INTRODUCTION

For most children, reading a story can be considered as a boring activity. It is because they often feels difficult to illustrate the picture of situations in the story and difficult to understand the meaning of the story. Normally, children are easier to understand many things through visual display of what they see rather than of what they just read. In this case, picture book can be used as a media for children to learn and enjoy more the story as it serves both picture and words. According to Kennedy (2019) picture book is a kind

of story book, typically for children, which consists of illustrations and words. The illustrations in the picture book are probably as important as or more important than the words in telling the story.

Picture book becomes one of learning tools for children in America to learn everything because it tells many stories of different topics. In this paper, the writer is interested in analyzing the cultural differences happened in America, particularly for immigrant children. As what Lamme (2004: 123) said that "Immigrant stories are an important part of American history because the story humanize the immigrant experience and provide a pivotal segue through which to delve into U.S. history." The writer uses picture books, which raise a topic about immigrant children in America, as the object of this study because many of picture books provide several distinct stories from many different experiences about immigrant children. Some of the stories might be based on the real story about immigrant experiences. It is not only conveying about the story of what they experienced, but also delivering a deeper meaning on how they feel to struggle and adapt with cultural differences in their new environment.

From several picturebooks about the experiences of immigrant children, the writer is quite interested in learning how they build their identity in a new place which is completely different from their homeland. Each story of picturebooks serves several different messages and important points which are able to enhance perceptions on how the readers describe who immigrant children are and what they feel during their adaptation.

The writer chooses the character of Yoon in the story of picture books as she represents one of the immigrant children in America who experiences several difficulties in adjusting herself to American culture, especially in her school environment. Helen Recorvits, the author, and Gabi Swiatkowska, the illustrator, have created an encouraging story in the character of Yoon, a little Korean girl who moves to America. It is an interesting story from one of the immigrant children. Their first book of Yoon is *My Name is Yoon* (2003), about Yoon's refusal to be part of America. They provide an educational message that make the reader will think deeply to feel the warm feeling inside the story. Another story of Yoon is *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (2006). It will probably give us more understanding about how Yoon's progress to welcome American culture after her adjustment to the new environment.

Yoon is a little Korean girl who moves to America. In *My Name is Yoon* (2003), her parents encourage her to write her name in English. Yoon always refuses to learn English. She even thinks that if she writes her name in English instead of in Korean character, her name will have a different meaning. At the end of the story, Yoon finally realizes that she has to learn American culture because it can help her to build the interaction and relationship with her teacher and classmates.

In *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (2006), it is Yoon's turn to teach her parents about something she has learned at school about American culture. When Yoon's teacher lends her a book about Santa Claus, she is really looking forward to coming home and showing it to her parents. Yoon is disappointed when her parents do not respond anything. They also keep on explaining to Yoon that they are not a Christmas family. As the Christmas Eve is coming, she learns more and more about the excitement of Christmas holiday. But, her parents always refuse whenever Yoon tries to persuade them to follow the customs of American family. According to Wellek and Warren (1948) an author of literary work is influenced and also influences society. The author of Yoon's picture book is more likely influenced by society in America in writing her story, especially immigrant children from Korea. Yoon who decides to convince her parents to follow American custom is influenced by the story of Santa Clause she has read from the book. The story of Yoon also influences the readers because then the readers, particularly children, can gain more their understanding about immigrant children in America

Yoon's stories in those two picture books serve social interaction in the society. These social interactions are between Yoon and her family, Yoon and her schoolmates, and Yoon and her teacher. Sociological approach is perhaps the most appropriate approach in conducting this research as sociology also studies about society, human interaction, and their activity in social group. Swingewood (1972) defines that sociology as a scientific and objective study of human beings in society, the study of institutions and social processes. Sociology can be also said as a way in which humans adapt themselves and are determined by certain societies, a picture of the mechanism of socialization, a cultural learning process, by which individuals are allocated to and accept certain roles in social structures.

Based on the explanation above, the writer is interested in analyzing how Yoon's rejection towards her new cultural environment, how Yoon adjusts with the cultural differences, and how her adjustment influences her identity.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study was descriptive qualitative approach based on the library research. This qualitative method focused on the analysis of content sources, such as book, journals, newspaper, magazine, TV show, etc. as data sources. This study used sociological approach in analyzing the main character's social interaction in the society. It helped the writer to describe social life of Yoon in the society and her surroundings. The primary data collected are from two picture books, namely *My Name is Yoon* (2003) and *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (2006).

DISCUSSION

Yoon's Rejection towards Her New Environment

In the first book of *My Name is Yoon* (2003), Yoon shows more her rejection by refusing to be part of America. At the beginning, when her father asks Yoon to learn and write her name in English, She doesn't want to do it.

I wrinkled my nose, I did not like Yoon. Lines. Cirles. Each standing alone. "My name looks happy in Korean," I said. "The symbols dance together. And in Korean my name means Shining Wisdom. I like the Korean way better." (Recorvits, 2003: 3).

From this thing, we can see that Yoon still wants to hold her identity as a Korean girl. She doesn't want to accept American culture to learn English, especially to write her name in English. As a little girl, it is kind of normal situation when Yoon is still unable to adapt with new things in a short time. She and her family have just moved to America. Yoon feels uncomfortable with a lot of differences she has to face. As we know that there are many cultural differences between Korea and America. Therefore, she expresses her dislike to America as in the extract below:

I did not want to learn the new way. I wanted to go back home to Korea. I did not like America. Everything was difficult here. (Recorvits, 2003: 4).

Yoon feels that everything is difficult in America. One of the difficult things is about language barrier. As much as the writer knows from the television, news, or internet, most of Korean people use Korean character for literacy learning. They even learn English by using Korean character to write English language based on the Korean

pronunciation. For example the word 'sandwich', it will become 샌드위치(saendeuwichi). In addition, they do not use English alphabet in a public area as well, although many tourists abroad come to Korea. This kind of language barrier makes Yoon has to work hard in learning English.

Another Yoon's rejection is also shown when she is at school. It has been several times her teacher asks Yoon to write her name in English Alphabet. Instead of writing Yoon, she writes Cat, Bird, and Cupcake. Yoon still doesn't want to make relationship with her environment at school. But her teacher is always patient to encourage Yoon in finding her identity that she is part of American as well.

I did not want to write YOON. I wrote CAT instead. (Recorvits, 2003: 6)

But I did not want to print YOON. I wrote BIRD instead. (Recorvits, 2003: 12)

I did not want to write YOON. I wrote CUPCAKE instead. (Recorvits, 2003: 18)

Adjustment and Acculturation

Most of the immigrants, both adults or children, no matter where they are from, share similar experiences. They undergo cultural differences and are away from their family and friends. They, particularly children, even face a language barrier. At the beginning children will always feel lost and lonely. They will miss their country of origin. But they struggle to adjust to that new environment. Occasionally, children refuse to accept that they live in a place which is going to be their new home. As it is told in *My Name is Yoon* (2003), Yoon is an immigrant child who does not only struggle in a new environment, but also refuses to be part of that environment. She always rejects to write her name in English and she tells her parents that she wants to go back to Korea because in Korea she has made a lot of friends.

It takes time for the immigrants to make an adjustment. In the process of transition they probably find several obstacles to adapt with many different things. As the time goes by, they involve in the new environment and continuously immerse with American society that will bring them to the acculturation.

One winter day my teacher in my new American school read my class a story. It was about Mr. Santa Claus, who lived at the North Pole. ... My teacher let me take the Christmas book home, and that night I showed it to my father. (Recorvits, 2006: 4)

In *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (2006), she enjoys learning American culture. After Yoon makes her adjustment by the encouragement from her parents and teacher, Yoon finally admit that she is part of America. She thinks that may be America is a good home and being different is good, too. She shows her progress by making more friends at school and she can get along with them. Since she goes to school in America, she probably learns most of American culture more than her native culture. As it is illustrated in the story, Yoon know about Santa Claus from her teacher at school, and she is really excited to tell about Santa Claus to her parents.

Yoon would like to follow the American tradition by convincing her parents to put up stockings at the Christmas Eve. She gets that story from her friends at school. They are talking about Mr. Santa Claus who will come at the Christmas Eve and fill the stocking with surprises.

At school the boys and girls talked about the stockings they would hang on Christmas Eve. Mr. Santa Claus would fill them with surprises. I knew my mother and father would not allow me to hang a Christmas stocking. (Recorvits, 2006: 13)

In this case, the writer could discover an implied message from Yoon's experience that she is in the process of acculturation. Yoon can accept a new tradition, in which she is not supposed to do it as a Korean family. Her parents keep on saying no, no matter how hard Yoon tries to persuade them.

When my father came in to see me, he asked, "What is this I hear about a Christmas mitten?"
I lowered my eyes. "When Santa Claus comes, that is where he will leave my surprise."
My father shook his head. "Yoon, I have told you. It is not the Korean way."
"But father," I said, "you have also told me that America is our home now. Are we not Korean and American? (Recorvits, 2006: 17)

Why adults can hardly accept the acculturation is because they actually want to still keep their native culture. Just like Yoon's parents, they keep on telling Yoon that they are a Korean family, not a Christmas family. It reflects that Santa Claus and the stuffs relating to him are not Korean tradition as well. Though her effort in convincing her parents seems useless, Yoon is tenacious that she will still follow American tradition. She believes that Santa Claus is coming to bring her a present and he will leave it in her mitten at the Christmas Eve. The writer picks the idea on this situation from Lamme

(2004: 126), which said that “a common theme in immigrant picturebooks is the different perspectives that children and their parents have. The youngsters, because they attend school, are more Americanized and believe that their parents are not only old fashioned but also too tied to their culture of origin. Nonetheless, many of the child protagonists honor the requests of their parents.”

From the case of Yoon’s story, we can see the important points that they are facing cultural differences between Korean and American culture. Children undergo this phase are more open than the adults are. Iser (1993: 205) suggested, “during and following engagements with literary fiction, readers produce new knowledge about themselves that continues to function alongside existing knowledge”. In all cases, Yoon’s story shows us that in the process of her acculturation, she discovers the new knowledge about American culture through the book about Santa Claus. When children get the meaning of any reading they encounter, they normally respond it by applying their understanding to their real life. Children also acculturate into the custom and tradition much faster, as they engage in and with many different textual forms and literacy practices at school, just like Yoon who learns about Mr. Santa Claus from the book she borrows from her teacher.

Developing Identity

Identity will always matter wherever we are. People will understand each other by knowing any of personal identity in which people represent themselves as who they are. “Identity matters because it, *whatever it is*, shapes or is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with text” (Moje, 2002: 228). In school context, literacy also plays an important role in developing identity. School has been an important mean as the place where most of children spend their time, gather with their peers, make a friend or relationship, find and learn many new things from the teacher and their surroundings. Students are challenged to establish and represent their way of thinking through literacy practices.

The process of literacy learning wherever they are can be a kind of tool to experience anything in shaping their identity in the future, particularly for children. Children are likely to have larger access to gain their knowledge at school, home,

organizations, communities, or even their peer groups. Children have all of those accesses more than the adults do.

As portrayed in *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (2006), Yoon knows much about herself that she is still from a Korean family. From her attitude to her parents, she still respects her parents which it supposed to be done in the eastern culture that children have to always respect and obey the adults or parents. They have to follow their parents' rules as well. But, the way Yoon insists on following American tradition by convincing her parents to put up stockings is a natural action that children experience. That is because of the influence from the teacher who read a story about Santa Claus and let her to take that Christmas book home. Her friends at school also talk about the tradition they do in the Christmas Eve. Yoon wants to be like her friends in America by believing in Mr.Santa Claus.

Lamme (2004: 126) finds that "Immigrant, especially children, are becoming Hyphenated American (for examples, Asian-American. Or particular cultures, Japanese-American, Mexican American) no matter they try to keep their traditions. New identity is a big issue among immigrant children". From this idea, we know that immigrant children tend to have feeling that they also belong to America. That is why there is always a process of changing identity during their settlement in America.

My father pushed the book away. "We are Korean. Santa Claus is not our custom."

"Little Yoon, "my mother said, "we are not a Christmas family. Our holiday is New Year's Day." (Recorvits, 2006: 5)

In this case, Yoon is in the process of becoming an American. Her parents want Yoon to still keep their tradition by explaining that they are a Korean family and they will only celebrate the New Year's Day, not Christmas Eve. Yoon tries to fit into American culture. Since she lives in America, she wants to be treated as American by her parents. The story also tells us that she even convinces her parents that they can be a Christmas family.

Although children are more likely to try to fit with their new environment by assimilating, it doesn't mean that they reject their native culture and value. In the acculturation process, children do not necessarily have to choose between values and

identities. Many of the immigrants will probably become bicultural, in which people describe it as the ability to switch between two different cultures.

The immigrants from Asia are normally becoming hyphenated American. People from Asia who move to America, or Asian descendant who were born in America and live in America tend to be called as Asian-American. As it is mentioned by Pang (1990) that the term Asian-American covers a variety of national, cultural, and religious heritages. Indeed, Asian-Americans represent more than 29 distinct subgroups who differ in culture, religion, and customs. The four major groups of Asian-Americans are East Asian, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean; Pacific Islander; Southeast Asian, such as Thai and Vietnamese; and South Asian, such as Indian and Pakistani.

CONCLUSION

Yoon and the Christmas Mitten (2006) is one of the picturebooks that serves an example of immigrant children who change and develop their identity. Yoon is not only a Korean girl, but also an American. In America there is a tendency on how people call those immigrants. Those who come from Asia tend to be called as Asian-American. The character of Yoon describes who Asian-American children are. As she comes from Korea, she becomes Korean-American as well.

By the influences from the environment and culture, Yoon changes her mind to accept American culture as part of her identity. She also develops her identity as an Asian-American by the encouragement from her parents, teacher, and friends. Family and people surrounding have the most important role in helping children to grow as a natural kids without being alienated in a new country. They become a trigger spirit, just like Yoon's parents, teacher, and friends who find a way to support Yoon in adopting American culture through the acculturation. That is when the time Yoon's parents encourage her to write her name in English in *My Name is Yoon* (2003), and when Yoon's teacher and friends encourage her to believe in Santa Claus as to follow American tradition in *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (2006).

The importance of acculturation process in bridging two different cultures becomes part of the issues in the identity development. Through this kind of picturebooks, children are motivated to have more understanding about children's life

experiences which are mostly different from one to another. The writer believes that children who read more picturebooks about immigrant children experiences will have a good perspective to tolerate with others. They will also be able to position themselves in a multicultural society like America. That is what the author and illustrator are trying to represent their purpose to the readers, through the messages in the story of Yoon.

REFERENCES

- Eric Resource Center. (1994). Asian-American: What teacher should know. *Eric Development Team*, pp. 1-6.
- Kennedy, E. (2019, July 3). *What is a Picture Book?* Retrieved October 8, 2019, from Thoughtco.com: <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-picture-book-626980>
- Lamme, Linda, L., & et al. (2004). Immigrant as portrayed in children's picture books. *The Social Studies*, pp. 123-129.
- Moje, E. B., & McCarthy, S. J. (2002). Identity Matters. *Reading Research Quarterly*, pp. 228-238.
- Recorvits, H., & Swiatkowska, G. (2003). *My Name is Yoon*. New York: Frances Foster Books.
- Recorvits, H., & Swiatkowska, G. (2006). *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten*. New York: Frances Foster Books.
- Sumara, D. J. (1998). Fictionalising acts: Reading and the making of identity. *Theory into Practice*, pp. 203-210.
- Swingewood, A. (1972). *The Sociology of Literature*. Paladine.
- Wellek, R., & Warren, A. (1948). *Theory of Literature*. London: Penguin.