

The social constructs of childhood: with reference to 'Refugee Boy' by Benjamin Zephaniah.

Introduction

Childhood is not a fixed or universal stage of life as childhood can be different for every child, however it is widely understood as a social construction shaped by historical, cultural, political and economic influences. Childhood Studies scholars argue that ideas about who children are, what they need, and how they should behave change across time and place, reflecting the values of society rather than biological facts during an individual's childhood (James and Prout, 1997). This means that childhood is experienced differently depending on social context. As a result, representations of childhood in children's literature often reflect the dominant beliefs and concerns of the time in which the text is written. For example, in today's society some standards are a 'social norm' or seen as 'common sense'.

The social construct of childhood can be seen by examining how children's roles and responsibilities have changed historically. In pre-industrial societies, children were often expected to contribute economically by working alongside adults. However, in modern western times, childhood is more commonly associated with vulnerability, dependence and the need for protection and education (Aries, 1962). These changes show that childhood is shaped by social expectations, laws and institutions rather than being a natural experience.

Literature provides a useful way to explore these changing ideas about childhood. Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* (2001) presents a view of childhood that challenges dominant western assumptions of innocence, safety and protection. Through the character of Alem, a refugee child who experiences war, displacement and racism, the book highlights that not all children are able to experience a protected or carefree childhood. Benjamin Zephaniah draws attention to how political conflict and global inequality shape children's lives in ways that contradict idealised views of childhood.

Two key discourses that are useful for analysing *Refugee Boy* are romantic discourse and utilitarian discourse. Romantic discourse presents childhood as a time of innocence, purity and emotional vulnerability, where children should be protected from harm and adult responsibilities (Jenks, 1996). This view strongly influences western education and welfare systems and underpins policies such as the Early Years Foundation Stage, which emphasises safeguarding and wellbeing (DfE, 2021). In contrast, utilitarian discourse views children in terms of how useful they are to society, often focusing on their future roles as workers rather than their present experiences. Historically, this discourse justified child labour and continues today through the importance of achievement and productivity.

This essay will explore how these discourses are reflected and challenged in *Refugee Boy*. It will examine how Zephaniah presents childhood within the social and political context of the early 2000s and how Alem's experiences disrupt dominant

constructions of childhood. When reading and analysing this book, links can also be implemented to Early Years policy to demonstrate how these discourses continue to influence understandings of childhood in practice.

Main body

Childhood has not always been recognised as a separate or valued stage of life within British society. Historians and childhood scholars argue that ideas about childhood have changed over time and are shaped by social, cultural and economic conditions. Aries (1962) famously suggested that during the middle ages, childhood was not clearly defined and that children were often viewed as 'miniature adults', not to compare then to size and height but relating to children getting ready and preparing for responsibilities as an adult. According to Aries, this shows that the idea of childhood as a time requiring protection and care is a relatively modern concept.

However, later scholars have challenged Aries work. Pollock (1983) argues that Aries relied heavily on Western historical sources and that a lack of written evidence does not mean childhood was unrecognised or unvalued. Heywood (2001) builds on this by suggesting that childhood should be understood as a combination of adult attitudes, cultural expectations and social experiences. These debates highlight that childhood is socially constructed rather than fixed, which is important when analysing Refugee Boy, as Alem's childhood doesn't quite fit into Western ideals of protection and innocence.

In seventeenth century Britain, childhood was strongly influenced by puritanical discourse. Children were often viewed as sinful and morally weak, requiring discipline and correction in order to become good adults (Stone, 1977 cited in Clarke, 2010). This construction made children seen as problems to be controlled rather than individuals to be nurtured the way practitioners in this day and age to be seen. Firestone (1970) also highlights gender differences during this time, where boys were more likely to experience a recognised childhood, while girls often moved quickly from infancy into adult roles. These ideas help to contextualise how power and morality have historically shaped childhood.

Additionally, the industrial revolution marked a significant turning point in childhood experiences. As Britain became industrialised, many children worked long hours in factories and mines, and in dangerous conditions (Tuttle, 2018). This reflected a utilitarian discourse, where children were valued mainly for their economic contribution to the family and society. This discourse can be linked to the refugee boy as Alem is forced into adult responsibilities due to war and displacement, rather than being protected as a child (Zephaniah, 2001).

During this period, when ideas about childhood began to shift towards protection and innocence, the romantic discourse of childhood was shown by presenting children as naturally vulnerable and in need of care. This discourse is clearly reflected and challenged in Benjamin Zephaniah's Refugee Boy (2001). In the novel,

Alem is portrayed as a child who should be protected due to his age and vulnerability, particularly when he arrives in the UK seeking asylum. In the book it shows where adults attempt to provide care, such as social workers arranging foster placements and access to education, reflect romantic ideas that children require safety, stability and emotional support (Zephaniah, 2001).

However, *Refugee Boy* also highlights the limitations of this romantic discourse. Although Alem is a child, the protection he receives is inconsistent and shaped by social class, race and immigration status. Unlike children from secure and privileged backgrounds, Alem is required to follow the rules of legal systems, asylum interviews and racism, experiences that force him into adult responsibilities. This reflects how romantic constructions of childhood are not universally applied and often exclude children with indifferences. Zephaniah's shows that the romantic discourse in the book is portraying children as innocent and deserving of care, this protection is the love from his parents (Zephaniah, 2001).

Social reformers played a key role in shifting attitudes towards childhood. Shaftesbury's investigations into child labour contributed to the 1833 Factory Act, which limited working hours and introduced education alongside labour (Hammond et al., 2020). Similarly, Mary Carpenter who was a social reformer in Britain, had worked with disadvantaged children that led to reform schools and the Youthful Offenders Act 1854, recognising that children should not be treated in the same way as adults within the justice system (Carpenter, 1853; Sayeed, 2018). These reforms reflect a growing recognition of childhood vulnerability, alongside utilitarian expectations. This outlined the history and social construct of childhood in earlier years in England.

By the late nineteenth century, legislation such as the prevention of cruelty to Children Act 1889 and compulsory education strengthened the romantic discourse of childhood (Hendrick, 1997; Nutbrown, 2014). However, education also reinforced utilitarian ideas, as childhood became viewed as preparation for adulthood and employment (Uprichard, 2008).

In the twenty first century, childhood is often understood through the concept of the 'global child' where education and protection are seen as universal rights (Wyness, 2018). This ideal is reflected in policy such as the EYFS framework, which prioritises safeguarding and wellbeing (DfE, 2021). *Refugee Boy* challenges this by showing how Alem, despite being a child, is denied these protections due to war, race and immigration status. Practitioners understand that children's experiences of childhood can be very different. While frameworks such as the EYFS focus on safeguarding and development, it is important that practitioners reflect on how policies are applied in practice. Protection also involves safeguarding practices, such as following child protection policies, attending safeguarding training, and knowing how to report concerns. Practitioners must be alert to signs of neglect or delayed development as early identification can prevent long term harm. Zephaniah highlights how childhood is experienced differently depending on social and political context, reinforcing the

idea that childhood is socially constructed rather than similarly shared with every childhood (Zephaniah, 2001).

Understanding the historical construction of childhood is essential for practitioners, as it encourages reflection on how adult power and dominant discourses shape children's lives from a young age (Walsh et al., 2011). This understanding provides a foundation for analysing how romantic and utilitarian discourses link within *Refugee Boy*, which will be explored in the following sections.

Romantic discourse presents childhood as a time of innocence, vulnerability, and emotional need, suggesting that children require protection, care, and nurturing (Jenks, 1996). In *Refugee Boy*, Benjamin Zephaniah uses the character of Alem to reflect this discourse and to highlight its limitations, especially when race and refugee status shape how protection is given.

When Alem first arrives in England, he is positioned within a romantic discourse of childhood. Having fled war in Eritrea and Ethiopia, Alem is scared, confused, and alone. His father leaves him at the refugee council, believing England will offer safety (Zephaniah, 2001, Chapter 2). This scene presents Alem as vulnerable and in need of adult support, reflecting romantic ideals that children should be cared for.

Alem's first foster placement with the Fitzgeralds is a key example of romantic care. They provide him with a warm home, meals, and a sense of security, these actions demonstrate nurturing and concern for his wellbeing. For instance, when Mrs Fitzgerald reassures Alem about his sleeping arrangements and encourages him to eat, these simple acts of care reflect the belief that children require emotional support and protection after trauma (Zephaniah, 2001, Chapter 4). Their behaviour links with romantic discourse by treating Alem as deserving of comfort and stability when giving him a place to stay.

However, Zephaniah also shows that Alem had opposite experiences from different individuals. Despite the Fitzgeralds' kindness, Alem continues to confront everyday reminders of being different because of his background. At school, classmates bully him with racist remarks, and he feels excluded from social groups (Zephaniah, 2001, Chapter 6). This highlights how race impacts romantic discourse like being cared for does not remove experiences of prejudice.

Furthermore, *Refugee Boy* challenges the romantic discourse that childhood should be free from adult responsibilities. Although Alem is young, he must experience complex legal and strict processes like intimidating asylum interviews where he is questioned about violence, death, and responsibility. (Zephaniah, 2001, Chapter 9) this was very new to him, and he was not prepared to go through this at a young age unexpectedly. Rather than being sheltered, Alem is forced into adult roles to secure his own future, showing how romantic ideals of protection can fail refugee children whose childhoods are shaped by political systems and migration laws.

Legal and policy frameworks highlight this tension. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that all children have a right to protection, safety, and

care. In the UK, legislation such as the Children Act 1989 and guidance within the EYFS framework reinforce the duty to safeguard children (DfE, 2021). However, Alem's uncertain immigration status shows that race and refugee status often undermine these protections, as he waits for decisions that will consider his right to stay in the UK.

By presenting both nurturing adults and systemic challenges, Benjamin Zephaniah gives insight on romantic discourse. He presents that while childhood may be idealised as safe and cared for, this ideal is not experienced equally especially for racialised refugee children like Alem.

Utilitarian discourse view children as future contributors to society, and the main purpose of childhood is preparation for adult life (Uprichard, 2008). This perspective has historically influenced child welfare and education policy, for instance during the Industrial Revolution and the late nineteenth century. Shaftesbury, campaigned to protect working children from harsh conditions in factories and mines, not only out of compassion but also to ensure they could grow in a good environment at a young age (Hendrick, 2003).

In *Refugee Boy*, utilitarian discourse shares views on romantic discourse, shaping the ways adults respond to Alem and other child migrants. While Alem is seen as vulnerable and deserving of care, adults tried to give him a chance at his education and development while hoping he will be able to do well in school and for his future. For example, his foster carers encourage him to attend school, learn english, and adapt to British culture (Zephaniah, 2001, Chapter 4). This focus shows utilitarian thinking, for example, a child's learning and socialisation are valued both for their welfare and for the skills he will develop as a future member of society. This links to social and intellectual development in constructs of a childhood.

Utilitarian ideas are also present in how Alem is treated by state systems. Legal and welfare authorities often emphasise that refugee children must integrate, conform, and prove their worthiness to remain in the UK. While this approach ensures access to education and protection, it also places pressure on Alem to learn adult responsibilities, highlighting a tension between utilitarian and romantic discourses (Zephaniah, 2001, Chapter 9). This implies the debates in childhood studies, for example, contemporary scholars argue that developmental expectations, such as those informed by Piaget's cognitive theories (1896–1980), this can imply stages of ability and ignoring the unique experiences of children (James & Prout, 1997). Piaget's IQ testing and stage based models, though influential, cultural, racial, and social differences, which is particularly relevant when considering refugee children like Alem.

The novel also reflects how race and migration can relate with utilitarian discourse. Alem and other refugee children are positioned as both at risk and but also having potential to work their best. Their successful integration into schooling and society is

valued not only for their welfare but for own benefit to their future. However, systemic inequalities, racism, and the stress of asylum processes complicate this ideal. For example, Alem experiences prejudice at school and uncertainty over his legal status, which limits his ability to fully engage with educational opportunities (Zephaniah, 2001, Chapter 6). Overall, this book shows the utilitarian approach, which prioritises outcomes over the lived experiences and rights of children.

Historically and contemporarily, utilitarian discourse has influenced both policy and practice. Hendrick (2003) explains that while historical reforms like Shaftesbury focused on child protection and work regulation, modern debates highlight the need to balance protection with recognition of children's agency. In the EYFS framework, this reflects on safeguarding children and supporting their learning and development (DfE, 2021). For refugee children, this means practitioners must consider both their immediate emotional needs and their long term developmental potential, when combining romantic and utilitarian approaches in practice.

Utilitarian discourse in *Refugee Boy* highlights how children are framed as both vulnerable and productive. Zephaniah illustrates that refugee children like Alem experience pressures to perform and conform, while also needing protection and care. By combining historical perspectives, developmental theory, and contemporary policy, the writer encourages readers to consider how social constructions of childhood vary according to race, migration, and society expectations.

Conclusion

In the book *Refugee Boy*, it has shown that childhood is not the same for every child as childhood is socially constructed and shaped by history, culture, politics and society. By using *Refugee Boy* by Benjamin Zephaniah has explored how different childhood discourses, particularly romantic and utilitarian discourses, influence how childhood is understood. Alem's experiences show that not all children experience childhood as safe, protected or carefree, especially those affected by war, migration and racism.

The novel highlights the limits of romantic discourse, which presents children as innocent and in need of protection. Although Alem is seen as vulnerable, the protection he receives is inconsistent and influenced by his refugee status. Utilitarian discourse is also evident, as Alem is expected to adapt quickly, succeed in education and prepare for adulthood by taking on responsibilities beyond his age. This shows how children can be pressured to meet adult expectations while their emotional needs are overlooked.

These ideas are important for Early Childhood practice. As mentioned previously, in *Refugee Boy*, Alem was taken care of by the refugee council which ensured Alem's safety, welfare and wellbeing when he was left alone in England. This is why it is important for practitioners to notice delays in language, social interaction or emotional responses as it can indicate that a child is not receiving appropriate care

(Munro, 2011). It is important for practitioners to recognise that trauma can significantly impact a child's development. Trauma can affect brain development, making it harder for children to feel safe and to learn effectively. Early Years practitioners play a vital role in supporting these children by providing consistent routines by secure relationships and a calm environment. By understanding trauma and responding sensitively, practitioners can help children feel safe, supported and better able to develop and learn. (Bruce, 2011).

Historical beliefs about children continue to influence how childhood is understood in society today. In the past, children were often expected to take on adult roles, particularly during periods such as the industrial revolution, where work is prioritised over education and emotional wellbeing (Aries, 1962; Tuttle, 2018). These early views shaped a functional approach to childhood, where children's value was linked to usefulness rather than care. Over time, growing awareness of children's vulnerability led to changes in social attitudes and legislation, with greater importance to provide protection, schooling and welfare to all children (Hendrick, 2003). These changes helped form modern expectations that childhood should be a time of safety and development. Contemporary policies, including the Early Years Foundation Stage, reflect this by focusing on safeguarding and supporting children's learning and wellbeing (DfE, 2021). However, as explored in this essay, not all children experience childhood in the same way. Social factors such as inequality, migration and race continue to affect how childhood is lived and understood, showing that historical ideas still shape present day constructions of childhood.

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