

Breaking Boundaries and Defying Conventions: A Postmodern Study of the Subversion of Genre in *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang

Taranginee Prem Gupta

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Mithibai College, Mumbai, (M.S.) India

Abstract

In the realm of contemporary literature, rejection of conventions has become a commonplace occurrence. With the growth and popularity of postmodern aesthetics, artistic expressions have undergone an epiphany and are characterised by the way they reject traditional conventions and ideologies. The graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang is a prime example of a postmodern narrative that rejects easy classification and defies genre and narrative structure. Through a close reading of this text, this essay will explore the elements of postmodernism like fragmented narrative structure, intertextuality, and the use of graphics and comic conventions that make the novel a masterpiece of contemporary literature.

Keywords: postmodernism, fragmentation, subversion of conventions, graphic novel, intertextuality, comics, visual narrative

1. Introduction:

The graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang has been praised for its unique way of telling a story. The novel intersperses a variety of genres together to bring an animated movie experience into a reading mode. The amalgamation of forms like superhero comics, Chinese mythology, literature and the weaving together of multiple storylines classify this book as anything but conventional. Drawing on the racist themes faced by Asian immigrants, the story is a compelling narrative that has experimented with traditional modes of narration and storytelling. This work is at once complex, challenging, unconventional, and therefore postmodern. The present study shall analyse how the novel subverts traditional models by employing techniques like fragmented narrative structure, intertextuality and the use of graphics/comic style visuals that collectively form the typical postmodern aesthetic. The examination of postmodernism in literature enables us to deconstruct cultural products, commonly held ideas, and established norms and offers a critical commentary while also

proposing new ways of thinking about society, identity, and representation. In addition, postmodernism has had a considerable impact on a broad variety of sectors, such as literature, art, architecture, music, and film; thus, it is essential to comprehend both its influence and its legacy in order to comprehend contemporary forms of cultural creation.

2. About *American Born Chinese*:

Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* follows the story of three characters whose lives intersect in unexpected ways. The first character is Jin Wang, a Chinese-American boy who has a hard time fitting in at school and has a desire to make friends with the white children who are popular and also escape the constant bullying he is subjected to. The second is a legendary figure from Chinese folklore known as the Monkey King, an aspirant deity who wants to prove his worthiness to reside in the heavenly realm of the gods, who treat him with disrespect and as an outsider. The third character is Danny, a young white American who is ashamed of his Chinese cousin Chin-Kee, a disgusting caricature who represents every negative cliché that can be spoken about Asian

Americans. As the plot of the book progresses, the three protagonists' narratives begin to intertwine, illuminating long-held preconceptions and calling into question stereotypical representations of Asian cultures. As Jin is having trouble fitting in at school because of his growing attraction to a white girl and his exposure to racism, the Monkey King is having trouble gaining acceptance in the heavenly realm because of the classism that is prevalent there.

3. Breaking Boundaries and Defying Conventions:

Postmodernism defies a singular definition. It is a convention, a cultural epoch, and a complicated theory that gained prominence after the Second World War as a reaction to the era's massive cultural and political changes. It distinguishes itself through a rejection of conventional forms, an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, 25), fragmentation, complexity, and diversity. Postmodernism criticises the Western-centric mindset that marginalises Asian and other cultures, debunks the mindset that there is a single, objective truth that can be discovered through reason and science, and instead emphasises the importance of subjectivity and context in shaping knowledge and meaning. Blurring the lines between genres and conventions, the literature of postmodernism often challenges traditional genre conventions and can be

difficult to categorise or interpret. Some prominent names in this field include the father of postmodern theory, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Friedrich Nietzsche, Linda Hutcheon, and Judith Butler, to name a few.

3.1 Fragmented Narrative:

The graphic novel *American Born Chinese* uses an unconventional, fragmented narrative style. Fragmentation is a prominent postmodern element. By challenging the traditional notions of cohesiveness, coherence, and unity of plot structure with a beginning, middle, and end, postmodern narrative structures are difficult to understand. It incorporates non-linear structures, disjointed plotlines, and the aim of such fragmentation is to convey the message or, rather, a contemporary phenomenon: disorientation and uncertainty. The reader is forced to navigate through a maze of perspectives with events that are often arranged in non-chronological order or sequence. In the novel, Yang presents the readers with three separate plotlines that appear unrelated to one another, disconnected, and aloof. As the novel progresses, they start to intersect and converge. The story begins with the Chinese folklore of the Monkey King. The novel's first panel depicts a number of gods gathered at a celebration. These gods are not simply humans but a range of creatures who appear superficial and showy;



(Yang, 7)

background, which conflicts with his upbringing in the United States. We can see that he is caught between his dual identities since he wants to fit in at his school and be tormented less for

everything. As a result, he ceases to eat his customary Asian breakfast in his tiffin and has switched to eating American sandwiches.



(Yang,32, 34)

On the other hand, he expresses a strong desire to maintain his allegiance to his family as well as the Chinese cultural nuances. The story of Jin is told in the form of three vignettes that are tied to one another and shift across different ages and periods of time. Yang employs this strategy on purpose in order to place emphasis on the complexities of Jin's experiences and his fractured identity.

Similarly, the Monkey King's story emphasizes the issue of cultural assimilation and the need for acceptance. His demeaning experience drives him to

seek vengeance, and he works hard to achieve the pinnacle of powers and the art of Kung-fu, only to be mocked and thwarted by the other gods. As may be seen in the images below, Yang illustrates the magnitude of the Monkey King's abilities by depicting a variety of mythological, mystical, and surreal scenarios. These modalities of storytelling are more visual than literal, and as a result, they present a challenge to the conventional mode of narration while simultaneously drawing attention to the fractured and complex nature of identity.



(Yang,57-58)

Lastly, Danny's narrative investigates the effect of derogatory cultural preconceptions. Danny is actually the morphed Americanised self of Jin, who has been perpetually bullied for his Asian identity and is now embarrassed of his cultural roots. He can't stand his Chinese cousin Chin-Kee, whom the author has purposely created to exemplify the

negative and exaggerated stereotypes about Asians. Chin-Kee is an embodiment of Danny's or Jin's own shame and self-hatred. The cultural prejudices are so deeply ingrained and internalized that it affects their sense of identity. The intersection of these three tales results in a strong and unified narrative that questions traditional

concepts of identity and representation. The novel's fragmented form allows the author to explore the complexities and nuances of cultural identity in a fresh and thought-provoking way. The fragmented narrative is a significant postmodern aspect that unearths the complexities and nuances of cultural identity. Yang presents a narrative that defies traditional conceptions of coherence and unity by weaving together three unique tales that appear unrelated at first, underscoring the role of context, subjectivity, and intersectionality in constructing identity.

3.2 Intertextuality:

American Born Chinese is fundamentally postmodern in the sense that it subverts a large number of literary traditions. It does this by introducing new ways of employing literary and non-literary techniques that influence the process of meaning and comprehension. This makes the novel postmodern. One of the techniques that is used is intertextuality.

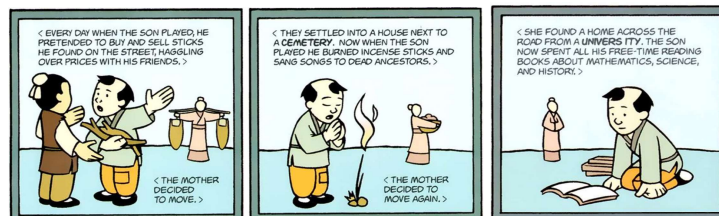
Intertextuality in postmodern literature is a dynamic process that alludes to other texts within a work and is used to deconstruct the idea of a singular authorial voice and rather create works that are multi-layered or form a kind of 'pastiche' i.e., a collage of elements that form a new work. This amalgamates various genres and creates a blurred distinction between high and low culture. There are multiple instances of intertextuality that can be found in *American Born Chinese* as it draws upon folklore and Chinese mythology. Yang's recasting of *Journey to the West* emphasises the character of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King. His insult and humiliation, when he tries to enter the celebrations with the gods who outcast him, is parallel with the story of Jin, who is similarly outcast and mocked by his peers at school. Yang uses intertextuality to draw parallels between the Monkey King legend and the novel's Chinese American protagonists' experiences.



(Yang,9)

The second example is the parable Jin's mother narrates at the opening of the second story as the family travels to their new home. She narrates a tale of a young Chinese boy who is influenced by those around him, and his physical surroundings. This parable is presented in

a literal 'frame narrative' which is a story within a story and is also translated from Mandarin Chinese, the author states. The use of "◊" in the panels below indicates that the mother is speaking in their mother-tongue.

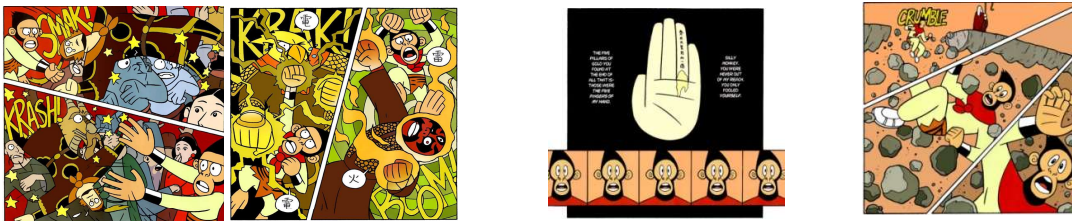


(Yang,23-24)

Another example of intertextuality in the novel is the use of American pop culture references, particularly in the storyline featuring Danny and his cousin Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee is portrayed as a grotesque caricature of Asian Americans, embodying every offensive stereotype about the community. Nevertheless, as the novel unfolds, it becomes evident that Chin-Kee is a fictitious figure invented by Danny to deal with his own guilt and humiliation about his Chinese origin. Yang's use of intertextuality allows him to criticize how American pop culture reinforces damaging stereotypes about Asian Americans while also noting how cultural identity is produced by various, intersecting factors.

3.3. Use of Graphics and Comics-Style Visuals:

The novel uses a plethora of visual techniques that make the experience of reading the novel akin to watching an animated movie. This method of consuming a literary text and creating meaning through not just words and sentences but also through the use of non-literary techniques is essentially postmodern. The comic strip layout creates multiple panels, and Yang has used a variety of angular shapes and varying sizes that convey the action scenes, and he uses smaller panels to create a sense of pace when the narrative demands. The panels cited below are some examples of this:



(Yang 17, 18, 78, 82)

The other comic-style techniques include the speech bubbles that reflect the characters' traits, their inner thoughts and feelings. There is a combination of speech bubbles and thought bubbles, indicated by cloud-like outlines that convey if the dialogues are spoken out loud or just thought. Sometimes, they also reflect the character traits; for example, Jin Wang's speech bubbles are rigid and squared, which mirror his shy and introverted personality. The graphic/comic style novel also uses auditory imagery that helps create sound effects that enhance the action sequences. For example, in the panel above, 'smack'

'krash' and 'boom' are used to create the sense of impact. The use of sitcom-like narration with audience laughter and clapping is used to narrate the section that contains Chin-Kee's narrative. The use of this heightens the humour and playfulness of the section. Moreover in this section, Yang also employs non-standard English to communicate this strangeness and curiosity of the reader and at worst to their prejudices of how they believe Asians speak the English language; "Everyone Ruvs Chin-Kee", (Everyone Loves Chin-Kee) "Harro Amellica" (Hello America), "Rong time no see" (Long time no see)



(Yang 43, 48, 49)

Conclusion:

Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* is a seminal example of a contemporary, new age work that amalgamates technological advances in graphics and design. The narrative techniques defy traditional genre conventions; the use of intertextuality creates a multi-layered story that challenges the reader to slow-down and immerse themselves in the reading experience. Interspersed with this are global issues that are fitting for a modern

globalised society like the internalisation of stereotyping, marginalising and isolating immigrants, along with the normalisation of soft racism. Yang's superiority in tackling the genre conventions of comics and intertextuality enables him to express the very nuances of Asian Americans, mainly the Chinese community. Through the experience of Jin Wang and the Monkey King, Yang is able to playfully yet impactfully throw light on and expose the repercussions of cultural stereotyping, making it a postmodern novel.

Works Cited:

1. *American Born Chinese*. Illustrated by Gene Luen Yang, First Second Books, 2006.
Bowker, <https://doi.org/10.1604/9781596431522>.
2. Lyotard. Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Translated by, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984.