

Q. Exploring the Dynamic Nature of Identity Transformation Through
Multicultural Experiences: The Significance of Accurate Representation
in Children's Picture Books

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Introduction

Identity is a complex and multi-faceted concept that is constantly evolving throughout an individual's life. One of the key factors that shape and transform one's identity is their exposure to diverse cultural experiences. The dynamic nature of identity transformation in multicultural experiences has been the subject of much research and academic inquiry. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need for accurate representation of diverse cultural experiences in children's literature, particularly picture books, as only "9% of children's books published in the UK in 2021 had a main character from an ethnic minority background" According to a study 'Reflecting Realities' published by CLPE (Serroukh, 2022) which is a very low number and thus cannot have many opportunities to see identity through cultural diversity represented. This essay aims to explore the changing of identity through multicultural experiences and the significance of accurate representation in children's picture books. This will be done through an in-depth analysis of relevant literature specifically picture book illustrator Shaun Tan's work 'The Arrival' and 'Tales from Outer Suburbia' and analyse the contrast between the themes of both books and how he incorporates illustration techniques and acquisitions to portray his experience as someone who grew up with a diverse culture. I will also examine how children's picture books can be used as effective tools for promoting intercultural understanding, appreciation and ultimately, aiming to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the role of literature in promoting cultural diversity and understanding, and its potential to shape the identities of young readers.

Section 1 – Deconstructing Identity

According to 'The Complexity of Identity: "Who Am I" by Beverly Daniel Tatum (Tatum, 2000), the concept of identity is multifaceted and intricate, with various factors playing a role in its formation. "Individual characteristics" (Tatum, 2000) such as personality traits, interests, and abilities are important components of one's identity. For example, an individual who values creativity and has a

talent for art may incorporate this characteristic into their sense of self and see themselves as an artist. Similarly, an individual who has experienced significant challenges in their life, such as overcoming a serious illness or personal tragedy, may see themselves as a survivor or a fighter, which can contribute to a strong sense of resilience and self-worth. Characteristics can also play a role in how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others. For example, an individual who is highly competitive may view themselves as successful only if they are achieving more than others, while someone who values collaboration may see success as achieving goals together with others. Moreover, someone who values honesty and integrity may consistently act in ways that align with these values, which can strengthen their self-image as an honest and trustworthy person.

“Family dynamics” (Tatum, 2000), including relationships with parents, siblings, and extended family members, also shape one's sense of self. For example, Positive family dynamics, such as supportive and nurturing relationships, can foster a strong sense of self-worth and confidence. This can lead to a positive self-image and a healthy self-esteem, which can, in turn, lead to a greater sense of happiness and fulfilment in life. On the other hand, negative family dynamics, such as neglect or abuse, can have a detrimental impact on an individual's sense of self. Such experiences can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem. This can also lead to negative beliefs about oneself, such as feeling unworthy or unlovable, and can lead to difficulties in forming healthy relationships with others. Family dynamics can also impact an individual's identity development. For example, if a family places a strong emphasis on certain values or beliefs, such as religion or cultural traditions, the individual may internalize these beliefs and incorporate them into their sense of self.

“Social and political contexts” (Tatum, 2000), such as community norms, societal expectations, and government policies, also play a significant role in shaping one's identity. For instance, discrimination, marginalization, and social inequality can impact an individual's sense of self-worth and identity and can limit their opportunities for personal and professional growth. In contrast, social and political

contexts that promote equity, diversity, and inclusion can provide individuals with opportunities to explore and develop their identity and can contribute to a sense of belonging and social cohesion.

“Historical factors” (Tatum, 2000) such as cultural heritage and ancestral roots can influence identity development and transformation. Factors that can occur such as immigration. Those who had a change of “cultural environments” (Chryssochoou, 2004, p. 2) and may even find themselves as part of the minority group and who are culturally non-dominant (Chryssochoou, 2004). Migration represents a significant life change for individuals, regardless of their reasons for doing so. Leaving behind loved ones, familiar surroundings, and established lifestyles to be then called “immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and foreigners” (Chryssochoou, 2004, p. 4) and may feel disconnected from their former environment and country. Upon arrival in their new country, they face new values, customs, and ways of life that can be disorienting, leading to confusion and anxiety about appropriate behaviour. “Prejudice and discrimination” (Chryssochoou, 2004, p. 4) are also common experiences for immigrants, adding to feelings of helplessness and a loss of control over their lives often referred to as ‘culture shock’ and will take time to get used to (Chryssochoou, 2004). Furthermore, in terms of first, second and thereafter generational immigration Children are then to socialize within a particular set of values and norms that are communicated to them by their parents and schools (Chryssochoou, 2004, p. 12). However, in multicultural environments, there may be conflicts between the values of a family and those promoted by institutional education. This can be particularly challenging for young people, who may find themselves caught between their family's values, practices, and expectations, and those of the wider society (Chryssochoou, 2004). These conflicts can create tension and confusion for children, as they struggle to navigate the complex terrain of competing value systems. It is therefore important for families and schools to work together to provide children with a supportive and nurturing environment that allows them to reconcile these conflicting values and develop a strong sense of their own identity. An environment where they too can see themselves and their emotions

and feelings recognised and represented through others, literature, and picture books. By doing so, children can learn to appreciate and respect different cultures and ways of life, while also maintaining a sense of connection to their own cultural heritage. Coping with these challenges and rebuilding one's life in a new environment is a crucial task for immigrants and the generation thereafter. Although the process of migration can be difficult and disorienting, it can also present opportunities for growth and a deeper understanding of oneself and the world.

It is through the interaction of these various factors that individuals develop a sense of who they are and how they fit into the world around them. Understanding the complexity of identity formation is crucial in promoting social justice and equality, as it allows us to appreciate and respect the diversity of experiences and backgrounds that contribute to individual identities.

As stated in Bhikhu Paraketh's book 'Rethinking Multiculturalism' "From the moment of birth, or even perhaps conception" (Paraketh, 2006) we can be subjected to significant social influences, such as beliefs, values and practices passed down from one generation to another. An example of this could be, if a child is born into a family that practices a particular religion, they may be exposed to religious beliefs and practices from an early age. Similarly, if a child is born into a family that speaks a different language, they may be exposed to this language and its associated cultural norms and values. Other cultural influences that children can be exposed to before birth include traditional customs and practices related to food, clothing, music, and art. Bhikhu states that as we grow even amongst our own cultural communities, they never exist in isolation and are always impacted by others around them (Paraketh, 2006, p. 163). They often adopt technology from other cultures, but this technology is never free from cultural influence and the advent of globalization has made it easier for technology to travel across the world, and with it, cultural values, and practices (Paraketh, 2006, p. 164). Some examples include, through trade and cultural exchange, foods and cooking techniques can be adopted and adapted. For example, sushi, a traditional Japanese dish, has become popular around the world, and has been adapted to local tastes in various ways. This increase in migration and globalisation has

brought cultures into closer contact with each other, leading to the “emergence of transnational diasporas” (Paraketh, 2006) that both transmit and synthesize cultures (Paraketh, 2006, p. 164). This interconnectedness of cultures highlights the importance of cross-cultural understanding and appreciation in today's globalized world and can show how cultural influences can play a significant role in shaping a child's identity and sense of belonging within their cultural community.

Section 2 – Picture Book Theory & Representation

As societies become more diverse, individuals may often find themselves navigating between different cultural identities, which can lead to significant changes in their sense of self. As we have found multicultural experiences can play a critical role in shaping a person's identity, as they learn to reconcile multiple cultural influences and integrate them into their sense of self. This process can be particularly challenging for children, who may be exposed to a range of cultural influences, from their surroundings, environments, other people and may struggle to find their place in the world. Illustrated books and children's books can provide a valuable representation of these experiences, helping children to understand and appreciate the complexities of cultural identity. With this it is also important that we as children see this process represented in literature as picture books have the power to provide children with a window into diverse cultures, helping them to develop empathy and understanding towards others.

"picture books are in the lives of many young children and as visually engaging as they can be for older children immersed in visual images of today's world, the opportunities for developing literacy, literary and aesthetic understanding through picture books is tremendous" (Kiefer, 1995) 'The Potential of Picture books' by Barbara Z. Kiefer

As Barbara states, picture books have become an integral part of many young children's lives. With their visually engaging illustrations, they capture children's imagination and spark their curiosity. However, picture books are not just for young children, as older children who are immersed in the

visual images of today's world can also benefit from them (Kiefer, 1995). They offer a unique way of storytelling that combines visual images with text, helping children to recognize and understand letters, words, and sentences helping to expand children's vocabulary, improve their reading comprehension, and develop critical thinking skills. They expose children to different types of literature, genres, and artistic styles, promoting cultural awareness and diversity.

Section 3 – Shaun Tan's 'The Arrival'

Shaun Tan's book, *The Arrival*, presents a touching migrant story through a sequence of wordless illustrations. It depicts the journey of a man who leaves his family in a deprived town and travels to an unfamiliar country on the other side of a vast ocean in search of a better future. Upon arriving in a strange and bewildering city, he is faced with unfamiliar customs, unusual creatures, and incomprehensible languages. With nothing but a small amount of currency and a suitcase, the immigrant must navigate his way to find food, shelter, and work. Throughout his journey, he encounters compassionate strangers who have their own untold histories of survival and endurance amidst a world of chaos, violence, and hope. *The Arrival* portrays the poignant struggles and triumphs of immigrants and celebrates the strength of the human spirit to persevere in the face of overwhelming adversity (Tan, 2004).



Figure 1 - The New Country, 2004-2005 graphite pencil, digitally coloured, 60 x 40cm

Shaun Tan's personal experiences as a half-Chinese child growing up in Western Australia in the 1980s, where he often felt like an outsider due to his mixed heritage, played a significant role in shaping his perspective on the concept of belonging (Drexel, 2014). The constant questioning of his origins and occasional racism that he faced both directly and indirectly towards his Chinese father gave him a vague sense of separateness and an unclear notion of identity (Drexel, 2014). This, along with the traditionally contested concept of what it means to be Australian, or un-Australian, led him to contemplate the basic existential question of belonging that everyone deals with from time to time. This theme is prevalent in his work, especially in *The Arrival*, a book that deals with the migrant experience, where he explores the concept of leaving one's home to find a new home in a foreign land, where even the most basic details of everyday life are foreign, confronting, or confusing (Drexel, 2014). As he puts it, the reinvention of belonging becomes crucial when one finds themselves in new realities, such as a new school, job, relationship, or country. Shaun Tan's preoccupation with strangers in strange lands made *The Arrival* an obvious story for him to tackle, and he spent a long period

working on it, with his personal experiences serving as a source of inspiration for the narrative (Drexel, 2014). His ability to depict the complexities of the migrant experience, where the struggle to adapt and fit in is magnified by the challenges of a foreign language and is a testament to his mastery of visual storytelling.

Tan's intricate illustrations and vivid imagery capture the migrant experience in a unique and powerful way. The story is told through a series of wordless images that allow the reader to connect with the migrant's experiences on a deeper level, without the need for language. "the absence of any written description also plants the reader more firmly in the shoes of an immigrant character" (Tan, 2004) creating a unique reading experience. Without any guidance as to how the images might be interpreted, readers are left to search for meaning and familiarity in a world where such things are either scarce or concealed. Words have a way of directing our attention and shaping our interpretation of images, but with their absence, the images themselves are given more conceptual space and demand a more thoughtful and lingering attention from the reader. This creates an immersive experience that invites the reader to participate in the process of interpretation and encourages a more personal and imaginative engagement with the story. Tan's deliberate choice to exclude words from his narrative creates a powerful and evocative work that captures the essence of the immigrant experience in a way that resonates with readers of all backgrounds. It highlights the importance of visual storytelling and its ability to communicate complex ideas and emotions in a way that transcends language barriers. This approach underscores the universality of the immigrant experience, as it highlights the commonality of emotions and struggles that transcend language barriers.

One of the most prominent techniques he uses is the juxtaposition of familiar objects and settings with fantastical or otherworldly elements. This creates a sense of displacement and disorientation that mirrors the experience of an immigrant in a new and unfamiliar place. For example, in one illustration, we see a street lined with houses and trees, a familiar sight in many parts of the world. However, the houses are all different shapes and sizes, and some have unusual features like spires or

domes. In the foreground, there is a man with a strange creature on a leash, adding to the sense of otherness. Tan also uses intricate details and patterns to highlight the diversity of cultures represented in the book. In one illustration, we see a group of people gathered around a table, and each person's clothing, jewellery, and hairstyles are distinct and representative of different cultures. This attention to detail emphasizes the richness and complexity of cultural diversity. "The Arrival" is a testament to the power of picture book as a medium for storytelling and a testament to the human experience of searching for belonging in an unfamiliar world.

Section 4 – Shaun Tan's 'Tales in Suburbia'

Tales from Outer Suburbia by Shaun Tan is a captivating anthology of fifteen short illustrated stories that delve into the author's memories of growing up in the northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia (Tan, 2006). Each story presents a surreal situation or event that occurs in an otherwise familiar suburban world. The stories include a nut-sized foreign exchange student visiting a family, a sea creature appearing on someone's front lawn, a new room discovered in a house, a mysterious machine installed in a park, and a wise buffalo living in a vacant lot. While the stories themselves are fantastical, the real focus of each one is on how the ordinary people in these suburbs react to these bizarre incidents (Tan, 2006). Through examining the residents' responses to peculiar situations, the stories in this collection delve into the ways in which significance can be either unearthed, overlooked, or misinterpreted, ultimately revealing profound insights into the complexities of human nature.



Figure 2 - The Visitor 2007, acrylic and oil on paper, 70 x 50cm

In "Tales from Outer Suburbia," (Tan, 2006) Shaun Tan delves into the concept of suburbia, both as a physical place and as a state of mind. While it may be seen as a mundane and unremarkable place, he argues that it can also be a realm of the subconscious, akin to the forests of fairy tales. Tan finds the idea of suburban "fantasy" (Tan, 2006) intriguing, as it creates a contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary and can be both amusing and unsettling. He had long considered creating a book of very short stories, inspired by the odd vignettes he sketches in his notebooks. These drawings often take the form of concise, strange cartoons with limited narratives. While some of them are not substantial enough to be elaborated into longer forms, Tan feels that they possess a certain charm and mysteriousness that would be lost with further development (Tan, 2006).

Shaun Tan's 'Tales from Outer Suburbia' uses a range of illustration techniques to portray cultural diversity in subtle but effective ways. For instance, in the story 'Eric', the illustrations show a diverse group of people attending a family gathering. The characters are depicted with varying skin tones, facial features, and clothing styles, reflecting the multicultural nature of modern suburban Australia.

In another story, 'Stick Figures', the illustrations depict a group of people from different cultures and backgrounds coming together to create a work of art, highlighting the power of creativity to unite people from diverse backgrounds. In the story 'Undertow', the illustrations show a young girl exploring a seemingly abandoned house, where she discovers a collection of objects that hint at the former occupants' diverse cultural backgrounds. For instance, there is a pair of traditional Chinese shoes, a Greek flag, and a Ukrainian egg decorating kit. The illustrations invite the reader to imagine the lives of the previous occupants and their cultural heritage. It's important for children to see diverse representations in literature and illustration because it helps them to understand and appreciate the differences and similarities among people from different backgrounds. This promotes empathy, compassion, and understanding, and helps to build a more inclusive and harmonious society. Children who grow up exposed to diverse representations are more likely to be open-minded and accepting of others, which can have a positive impact on their relationships, their communities, and the world at large.

Conclusion

In conclusion, identity is a multifaceted and intricate concept, influenced by various factors such as individual characteristics, family dynamics, social and political contexts, and historical factors and more. These factors contribute to an individual's sense of self and help shape their identity, especially with the experiences of immigrants and the generations thereafter as they experience culture shock, prejudice, and discrimination and so it is essential for families and schools to work together to provide children with a supportive and nurturing environment that allows them to reconcile conflicting values and develop a strong sense of their own identity. Understanding the complexity of identity formation is crucial in promoting social justice and equality, as it allows us to appreciate and respect the diversity of individuals and their experiences. Furthermore, as societies continue to become more diverse, multicultural experiences play an important role in shaping a person's identity. And as this can be especially challenging for children who are exposed to a variety of cultural influences, picture books

and children's books provide a valuable representation of these experiences, helping children to understand and appreciate the complexities of cultural identity. Picture books are not just for young children but also offer opportunities for older children to develop literacy, literary and aesthetic understanding. They expose children to different types of literature and promote cultural awareness, empathy, and diversity. Therefore, it is essential that we continue to encourage the use of picture books as an educational tool for children of all ages.

Shaun Tan's 'The Arrival' and 'Tales from Outer Suburbia' showcased the importance of why representation is important and the different ways he portrays them through both books. 'The Arrival' uses a sepia-toned colour palette to create a sense of nostalgia and historical significance. The illustrations are highly detailed and realistic, with intricate line work and shading that give the impression of old photographs or engravings. The use of visual storytelling is prominent, as there is little to no text in the book. The characters are depicted with a sense of anonymity, as they are often portrayed in silhouette or from behind, which highlights the universality of the immigrant experience. And in contrast 'Tales from Outer Suburbia' features more colourful illustrations that are often whimsical and surreal. The book uses a combination of text and image to tell its stories, with the illustrations often taking on a symbolic or metaphorical role. The characters are more distinct and individualized, and cultural diversity is represented through the inclusion of different ethnicities and nationalities. The book celebrates the diversity of suburban life, while also exploring universal themes such as belonging, identity, and human connection. This essay is in hopes to bring about more conversations about the topic of cultural diversity, multiculturalism and its importance to be represented in picture books.

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Figure 1 - The New Country, 2004-2005 graphite pencil, digitally coloured, 60 x 40cm (Tan 2004)

Figure 2 - The Visitor 2007, acrylic and oil on paper, 70 x 50cm (Tan 2006)

