

Subtle Shades of Racism in Ha Jin's *A Free Life*

P. Johanna Jenifer

Assistant Professor of English, Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Trichy, Tamil Nadu

Abstract

Racism has been prevalent for many centuries. It is still pervasive in this modern era. The fangs wound the victim psychologically and strip them away of their identity, happiness and opportunities. A Free Life by Ha Jin hints at the struggles, racism brings upon the Wu family who emigrate from China to America. They show a strong liking to their host land but the discrimination they encounter certainly casts a shadow over their lives making it hard to assimilate. The subtle marks of racial prejudice throughout the novel pictures the true side of the American society that upholds the American dream. The outward friendly appearance is deceiving. Ha Jin brilliantly narrates the impact of racial discrimination and he brings to light the racial bias ingrained in the minds of the American society at large. This paper aims to draw attention to the racial prejudice woven into the fabric of the novel and its impact on the lives of Nan and his family.

Keywords: Racism, Prejudice, Discrimination, Hindrance to Assimilation, Biased views, Immigrant Struggle.

Introduction

Xuefei Jin, better known by his nom de plume Ha Jin, is a Chinese American writer. His unembellished prose adds a charm to his works. He mainly writes in English and sheds light on immigrant experience. His story collections, *Ocean of Words* (1996) and *Under the Red Flag* (1997) garnered him the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. *Waiting* (1999), won him the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. Jin's personal struggles find their way into the novel as he himself is an immigrant. He has a first-hand experience of the struggles the immigrants go through in their everyday life.

Racism is seen as a "global problem" by many nations. Australian Human Rights Commission says that "Racism includes all the laws, policies, ideologies and barriers that prevent people from experiencing justice, dignity, and equity because of their racial identity." Racism can come in the form of harassment, abuse or humiliation, violence or intimidating behaviour. The psychological trauma they undergo prevents their assimilation. The stereotypes imprison them and their dreams remain dreams never to be fulfilled.

A Free Life by Ha Jin is brilliant novel that captures the struggles of assimilating and defining one's identity in a foreign land. Nan Wu and his family emigrate from China to the United States of America seeking to create a better future. Nan plans to complete his Ph.D., in Brandeis University and

return to China, where he can become a teacher. Their dreams are shattered after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, in which the People's Liberation Army, who were responsible for keeping citizens safe, mercilessly killed hundreds of innocent civilians who protested for their rights. The Wu family is disgusted at this retaliation and vows to never set foot in China again.

The Wus, unlike other immigrants who long to go back to their homeland, do not wish desperately to return to where they came from. They openly express their dislike for their country but their love for their country is shown involuntarily in many points in the novel. Nan and especially his wife Pingping, wishes to live in America permanently as they have grown to love the country. Nan is determined to pursue the American dream which he later discovers to be nothing but vanity. Nan and Pingping do everything they could to feel inclusive. However, the discrimination they encounter certainly casts a shadow over their lives making it hard to assimilate. Despite their love for their host land and their respect for their fellow Americans, they do not escape the grip of Racism. Jin hints at the struggles, racism brings upon the them. The Wus don't seem to complain much about the prejudices as they love other aspects of the country and as long as they could stay away from China, they are content with their life. The unpleasant, humiliating and depressing encounters that racism throws at them has an unmistakable impact on their psychological state.

The novel opens with the Wu family eagerly anticipating the arrival of their 6-year-old son, who was left in China with his grandparents. They become worried as their son's flight is delayed. Nan and Pingping enquire about their son's safety to the workers at the airport. This is where Jin subtly brings out the racial prejudice that the immigrants face at different places. They are not given equal importance and no one tries to understand Nan and Pingping's situation. Instead, they are shown hostility. They do not get a proper response from a staff at the airport. She looks Chinese but spoke only English. Pingping pleads with her to check the whereabouts of her only son. The lady gives them a cold reply and tells them she has other work to do. Nan refrains himself from pleading as the lady seemed clearly annoyed. He could detect contempt in her: "In her eyes, which had more white than black, Nan had caught a flicker of disdain, probably because she knew they were from mainland China and suspected they were still red inside, if not red to the bone." (Jin, 2007, p.5) She avoids them just because they were from mainland China. Immigrants are not just treated like outsiders by the host land's citizens but also by second generation immigrants who have had a better life than their parents or grandparents.

Following the Tiananmen square massacre, Nan quit his Ph.D., and takes a job of a night watchman in a factory in Watertown. He is not eager about the job but after being turned down at many jobs, he was running out of options. His supervisor, Dan, instructs him to go to a particular clinic to get a physical examination before he could be hired. Nan goes to the clinic and has the experience he has ever imagined. He is shocked by the indecent behaviour of the doctor who touches him inappropriately. Nan doesn't understand many terms on the form and couldn't ask the doctor if he was allowed to do this to him. This incident shows how Nan's ignorance is taken advantage of and "the more Nan thought about this, the more outraged he was." (Jin, 2007, p.27)

During his work hours at the factory, Nan goes to a nearby supermarket. He avoids colliding with a couple who just came out of the adjacent liquor store. They follow him to his car and coax him to join them. Nan soon understands their motive and leaves. The couple grow furious and chase him all the way to the factory. Nan is frightened and outraged at the same time. He wonders why they are doing this to him: "Why were they so determined to hurt him? Just because they could? Just because his face was yellow, not as white as theirs? How come they thought he'd like to take part in their monkey business?" (Jin, 2007, p.33) The Americans Nan runs into believe that Nan would be an easy target because he is not White and that he would do anything for money.

Nan is devastated and confused when Dan the factory's supervisor informs him of the factory's move. He was hired only three months ago and he was starting to like his job that gave him time to read books. Jin underscores inequality here. Dan does not mention the temporariness of the job to Nan. He wants an employee for the short span, a person who would readily accept a job offer, in other words Nan is manipulated and feels let down. Nan cannot work in the factory anymore as Taotao could have better schooling right where they were. Jin insinuates that Nan was just used to fill in the job and his rights to know of the significant details was never considered just because he is not an American. Dad doesn't feel that it was his duty or even a necessity to let Nan know of this. Inequality, a prejudice towards migrants in the workplace is shown here: "If Nan had been an American, Don would have been obligated to let him know the temporary nature of the job when he applied." (Jin, 2007, p.48)

Pingping invites Heidi, their wealthy employer, to join them for Thanksgiving dinner. Heidi appears friendly and seems to treat the Wu family well. However, her true colours are shown when racist thoughts ingrained in her mind find their way out. Nan and Pingping respect Heidi and wish for her welfare but Heidi could not treat them equally. Heidi brings up a topic that shines light on her racist

mindset. She asks Pingping about “the biggest difference between life in China and life [in America].” (Jin, 2007, p.49) Pingping has noted a number of differences and tells them to her. Heidi further wants to know where they lived in and puts it in a hesitant way: “Where did you live—I mean, in what kind of housing?” (Jin, 2007, p.49) When Pingping tells her that they lived in a house that only had one room, Heidi is shocked and mocks at them saying, “My goodness, I guess my house can accommodate a hundred Chinese.” (Jin, 2007, p.49) This displays how She views immigrants as inferior to her.

Other minor characters also reveal the discrimination the immigrants face in America. Tim, Nan’s fellow worker comments on how black people are treated: “Blacks are treated like trash in this country.” (Jin, 2007, p.64) Nan has always had a question in mind. He has seen job ads that wanted to hire “people of color.” Nan is confused as he believes white is also a colour and wonders: “Why were whites viewed as colorless? Logically speaking, everybody should be “colored.”” (Jin, 2007, p.64) The Americans openly state the word “coloured” underscoring that the immigrants were different and inferior to them. They seem to set a boundary that separates them and deprives them of equality. Tim points out that in Canada, people don’t call him coloured to his face and that the word is considered a bad word there. He further says that in America the immigrants are given inferior jobs and were rarely given good jobs. Nan awakens to the truth that America is not as great as he had thought. He ponders over the conversation he has with Tim. He wonders if Tim is right as Ads for government jobs and teaching positions urged immigrants to apply but then he realises he has “never seen a black postman or fireman in Woodland.” (Jin, 2007, p.63) Nan in one of his exchanges with Sandy he blurts out “The [truth] is that no matter how hard I work, I can never be more [than] a Social Security [number].” (Jin, 2007, p.63) Regardless of how hard they work, immigrants often do not rise in the social ladder.

The Chinese diaspora gather in a conference room to talk about a book published by two young journalists in mainland China that caused a stir in the Chinese living in America. A man in the conference room expresses the sufferings he has undergone and the dreams that were broken. He has been in America for two years and his sorrow hasn’t ceased: “How much bitterness have I swallowed? I was a doctor back in Tianjin City, but here I’m a custodian wiping windows and toilets. Who can relate to me? Who will speak for me? Who can know how a Chinese actually feels here?” (Jin, 2007, ch. 21) These lines highlight the fact again that the immigrants are not given equal rights and that they are given inferior jobs.

Heidi suspects Pingping of stealing her son, Nathan's calculator though she has been as trustworthy as Heidi could ever ask for. She goes to ask Pingping straight to her face, if she has taken her son's calculator without any hesitation. Pingping takes Heidi to Nathan's room and finds it. Heidi being her boss leaves without apologizing which makes Pingping furious and even wishes to quit her job there. Nan suspects Heidi to have "created some difficulties for them to chase them out." (Jin, 2007, p.156) Immigrants often find themselves in situations where they are blamed and would not be understood or given a chance to voice out their true feelings or pain. During summer Heidi doesn't give Pingping her wages but she could only remain silent. As immigrants in a foreign land, they could not voice their concerns and instead they bear it without protesting.

In one of Nan's poems titled, *The Donkey*, he describes the emotional and psychological weariness immigrants go through in a foreign land. Their constant complaisant behaviour is aimed at gaining others' approval drains them completely. They struggle to fit in the stereotype of their host land.

He lay in a ditch, his belly sweating,
heaving, while blood flowed from his mouth.
The old one-eyed driver was kicking him
and yelling, "Get up, you beast!"
Only a long ear twitched, as if to say "I'm trying."
I swear, he was too tired to get on his feet.
Unlike a horse playing sick,
he was too weak to pretend. (Jin, 2007, p.431)

Immigrants work all their lives to feel included and please those around them. They are at the mercy of their host land. Nan is determined to pursue the American dream but he breaks free from the vanity of feeling accepted and gaining a good status in the society. He could no longer pretend. He realises that he has lost many of his years to it and finds his identity as a result. They are not accepted as they are but stereotypes are imposed on them and are victimised.

Conclusion

Ha Jin touches on the effects of racism on the characters effectively. This subtle inclusion amplifies the impact. Nan and his wife wish to permanently stay in America and they have adapted to the culture though not completely. They face prejudice and are not treated equally by the people they

show utmost respect to. Jin depicts the effect of racism on even immigrants who love America and do not desire to go back to their homeland. They are not spared. Though they strive to assimilate into the culture the prejudice and discrimination become immovable hurdles that they simply accept to live with. This paper has highlighted the shadows of racism throughout the novel. Pingping's struggle can be studied to bring out the sufferings of immigrant women. The true meaning behind the concept of free life can be further analysed.

References

- 1) "What is racism?" *Australian Human Rights Commission*. Accessed 21 September 2024. humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/what-racism
- 2) Jin, Ha. *A Free Life*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007.
- 3) Knight, Henry Ace. "An Interview with Ha Jin." *Asymptote*. Accessed 21 September 2024. www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-ha-jin/
- 4) Rauch, Robert. "Ha Jin." *Britannica*. www.britannica.com/biography/Ha-Jin#ref1301992. Accessed 12 August 2024.