The Bioscan AN INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF LIFE SCIENCES 19(2): S.I (1), 961-965, 2024 www.thebioscan.com

Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity: Redefining Heroism in Gene Luen Yang's The Shadow Hero

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DOI: 10.63001/tbs.2024.v19.i02.S.I(1).pp961-965

KEYWORDS
Hegemonic Masculinity, Asian American Superheroes, Representation, Gender and Comics

Received on:

16-08-2024

Accepted on:

20-09-2024

Published on:

18-10-2024

ABSTRACT

The superhero genre has long upheld hypermasculine, White-coded ideals that equate heroism with physical dominance, emotional restraint, and social authority. Such portrayals marginalise alternative masculinities and exclude racialised men from heroic representation. Gene Luen Yang's *The Shadow Hero* (2014) disrupts these conventions by reimagining the Green Turtle as Hank Chu, a Chinese American superhero negotiating the competing demands of immigrant family expectations, cultural traditions, and societal constructions of masculinity. Drawing on Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, this paper examines how Hank's narrative both reflects and resists dominant masculine archetypes. Through its critique of violence, emotional suppression, and White-coded standards of heroism, the text redefines masculinity by foregrounding compassion, ethical responsibility, and cultural hybridity. By positioning an Asian American protagonist within a genre historically dominated by White hypermasculinity, Yang challenges racialised exclusions and opens space for counter-hegemonic masculinities. The study demonstrates how *The Shadow Hero* intervenes in broader cultural narratives of gender, race, and power, offering a reimagined model of heroism.

In the contemporary era, theoretical frameworks such as feminism and postfeminism are gaining significant scholarly attention for their focus on women's experiences and the structural inequalities that shape their lives. While these discourses primarily centre on the challenges faced by women, it is equally necessary to interrogate the construction of masculinity, which remains one of the underlying mechanisms sustaining gendered hierarchies. The same socially imposed gender roles that marginalise women also constrain men, who often struggle to reconcile their personal identities with rigid cultural expectations of 'masculine' behaviour. This recognition has expanded the scope of gender studies to encompass the analysis of both male and female identities, as well as the power dynamics between them.

A key figure in this field is Raewyn Connell, whose seminal work *Masculinities* (1995) introduces the influential concept of 'hegemonic masculinity.' Connell defines gender as "social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do… Gender exists precisely to the extent that biology does not determine the social" (71). She identifies four types of masculinity such as "Hegemony, Subordination, Complicity, Marginalization" (67). She argues that, hegemonic masculinity functions as the culturally exalted form of manhood, constructed as strong, dominant, and heterosexual, which legitimises male power over women and marginalises alternative masculinities. As the blog "Exploring the Different Forms of Masculinities" explains, hegemonic masculinity is characterised by qualities such as physical strength, assertiveness, emotional control, and the assertion of dominance over women and other marginalised groups. Subordinated masculinity refers to men who lack the traits typically celebrated within dominant masculinity. Complicit masculinity describes men who may not actively embody these ideals yet still benefit from the privileges they generate. Marginalised masculinity, meanwhile, refers to men who are not only positioned beneath hegemonic masculinity but also face additional disadvantages linked to race, class, or social status. Connell further locates masculinity across three domains—power, production, and cathexis—demonstrating how male dominance is maintained through political authority, labour divisions, economic structures, and the regulation of desire (73-75).

Extending Connell's framework, Jung Ju Shin in *(Re)Turn of the Abject: Representation of Asian (American) Masculinity in the West* emphasises the racialised hierarchy within masculinity. He argues that, "Hegemonic masculinity not only retains the system of patriarchy that legitimises and maintains men's domination over women" but also "produces and maintains hierarchies between men" (12). He further notes that Whiteness is "complicit to hegemonic masculinity," granting White men an "illusionary" sense of authority and power (16). In this framework, Asian American men often face 'secondary abjection,' wherein racialised men are marginalised not only racially but also within masculine hierarchies, presenting a narrative of remasculinisation designed to appeal to audiences uneasy with overt racial oppression (32). The influence of media in propagating such racialised masculine ideals is further evident in Steffi Lau's research paper "Unmasking 'Sidekick' Masculinity: A Qualitative Investigation of How Asian-American Males View Emasculating

Stereotypes in U.S. Media" which identifies prevalent stereotypes of Asian American men as "meek, short, smart yet socially awkward, nerdy, insane, strong accents, effeminate, out-of-shape, unsexy, and never paired with women—all qualities failing the Western conception of ideal masculinity" (15).

These frameworks provide a critical lens for analysing superhero comics and graphic novels, genres historically dominated by hyper-violent, hyper-muscular, emotionally stoic White protagonists. Gene Luen Yang's *The Shadow Hero* (2014) subverts this pattern by centring on Hank Chu, an Asian American superhero whose embodiment of masculinity disrupts the homogeneity of the genre's dominant masculine archetype. The novel reimagines 'The Green Turtle,' created by Chinese American cartoonist Chu Hing during the 1940s Golden Age of comics, a period dominated by White hypermasculinity. Chu Hing's creation was notable for featuring what is widely believed to be the first Asian American superhero. However, in the original series, the Green Turtle is consistently depicted with his face obscured, leaving his racial identity deliberately ambiguous. As Yang notes in his novel, "Supposedly, his [Chu's] publisher didn't think Chinese superhero would sell and told Chu to make his character White" (155). In his reimagining, Yang challenges this erasure by constructing an explicit origin story that centres on Hank Chu, a young Chinese American negotiating personal, cultural, and societal pressures.

Historically, Asian men in U.S. media were represented either as emasculated, submissive figures or hyperintelligent villains, excluded from the White-coded, rugged, and physically imposing ideal of heroism. Golden Age superheroes embodied cultural ideals of strength, courage, and heterosexual desirability, leaving little space for non-White men to be perceived as heroic. Yang's Hank Chu disrupts this template by negotiating both immigrant cultural expectations and dominant White standards of masculinity, foregrounding the long-standing invisibility of Asian American male heroism.

The novel highlights how gender norms operate within Chinese American families. Hank's mother, constrained by patriarchal expectations, exemplifies how men dictate women's lives. She marries a grocer in compliance with parental expectations and gives birth to a son because "her husband wanted a son" (6), illustrating her subjugation within domestic hierarchies. Paradoxically, Hank's mother has internalised the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, believing that "masculinity is what men ought to be" (Connell 70). The comparison of Hank's father with the mother's past lover, Uncle Wun—who is physically strong and skilled in combat—reveals her liking towards dominant, aggressive men who embody superior masculine qualities. Similarly, her contempt is explicit when she accuses her husband in Cantonese (indicated by the use of angle bracket) for being cowardly, stating, "<You think I don't know about you and that ***criminal?*** All because you're too afraid to stand up to him? And so your wife has to work, just to put food on the table! ***So shameful!>***" (34). In her view, Hank's father reflects Connell's idea of an unmasculine figure—one who is inclined toward peace instead of violence and prefers conciliation over domination (67). His refusal to confront the criminals who exploit them undermines the power dimension of hegemonic masculinity, which expects men to assert dominance through aggression. Furthermore, her need to work violates the production ideal—men as sole breadwinners—rendering him, in her eyes, a failure within the masculine hierarchy. Her worldview is shaped not only by Chinese patriarchal ideals but also by White-coded heroism. She is enthralled by 'The Anchor of Justice,' a White superhero, whose bold, 'masculine' acts leave her awestruck: "Never in her life mother seen anything so ***colorful"*** (18). Inspired by his courage and spectacle, she imposes her aspirations on Hank, compelling him to become a superhero despite his reluctance.

The novel further illustrates how society reinforces these masculine ideals. As a young boy, Hank is pressured by his neighbour uncles to drink whiskey: "<Go on, boy! One gulp! Show us you're a man!>" (8) When he fails, they mock him stating, "<. . . you take your alcohol like a woman!>" (9). Later, when Hank's mother takes him to Uncle Wun for Kung Fu training, the latter remarks, "<Your father is a good man, but by letting you loaf around that store, he has made you soft and womanly! I'm going to change that" (31), equating softness with femininity. He even derides Hank as a "pasty-faced girl!" (31) and advises, "<you fight to win>" (36), reinforcing the notion that true masculine valour lies in victory and that men are not meant to lose.

Under Uncle Wun's training, Hank gains physical strength and begins to admire his muscular physique in the mirror (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Hank's admiration of his physique (37)

This pride in his body reflects the ideals of masculinity commonly associated with White superheroes, where a well-built, muscular form is interpreted as a visible marker of inner strength and manliness. As the researcher Plotz notes, the visual portrayal of superhero characters often signals conformity to traditional masculine standards, particularly through the emphasis on muscularity (68). Hank's transformation from a thin, ordinary figure (fig. 2) to a muscular body reflects this superhero genre's demand for a controlled, perfected physique. It also echoes feminist philosopher Susan Bordo's argument that "close association of softness of the body with a lack of control can be seen in how even on thin bodies any kind of 'bulge' or 'flab' needs to be erased to ensure 'a body. . . whose internal processes are under control'" (qtd. in Plotz 68).

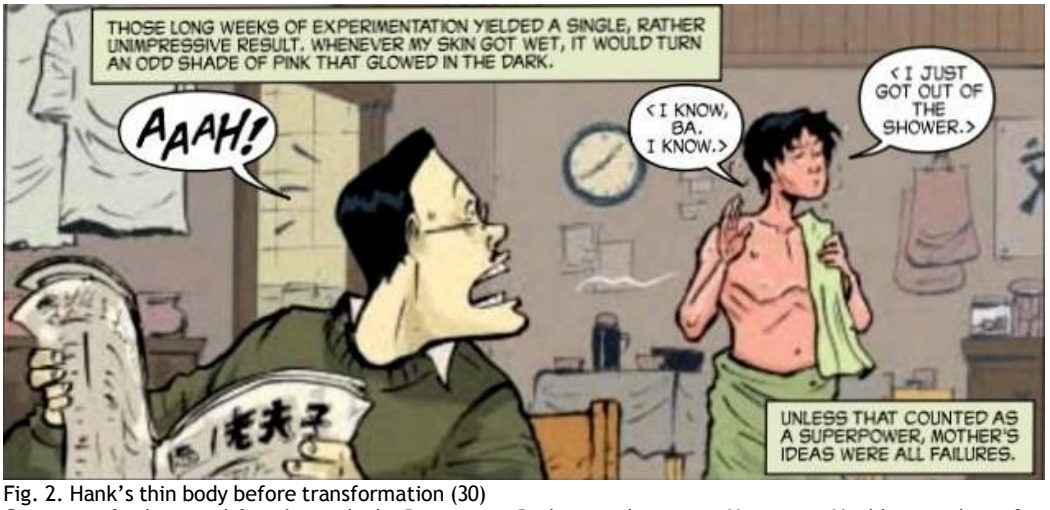

Fig. 2. Hank's thin body before transformation (30)

Costuming further amplifies these ideals. Drawing on Barbara and Graydon, Plotz notes that, a superhero's outfit not only accentuates the muscularity of the body but also emphasises how the body's movements engage those muscles, contributing to the performance of gender (68). This is illustrated when Hank's mother designs his costume based on The Anchor of Justice and names him the 'Golden Man of Bravery.' She insists that he cannot wear a mask, arguing that only criminals conceal their identities. This refusal equates visible, unhidden face with bravery, reinforcing the belief that true men must publicly display their courage.

However, Hank's initial confrontation with criminals subverts these conventional heroic ideals. In his attempt to rescue a young woman named Red, he is overpowered and, in an ironic reversal, he is saved by her instead. By portraying the hero as the one rescued by the heroine, the narrative inverts the traditional 'damsel in distress' trope and challenges the gender hierarchy embedded within the superhero genre. Although Hank's mother interprets this incident as a source of shame, the panel depicting Hank and Red exhaling into each other's faces, with their shared breath forming a Yin–Yang symbol (fig. 3), visually conveys the notion of gender parity, displacing the expectation of male dominance.

Fig. 3. Hank and Red's shared breath forming a Yin–Yang symbol (45)

This narrative inversion contrasts sharply with the broader societal environment, where male physical aggression is culturally valorised. As Connell observes, hegemonic masculinity helps explain why violence is normalised and admired in communities where masculine dominance is expected ("On Hegemonic Masculinity" 92). This dynamic is evident in the subplot involving Hank's father, who is regularly extorted by the Tong of Sticks gang led by Mock Beak. His failure to comply results in brutal attacks (fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Hank's father assaulted by the Tong of Sticks (52-53)

Here, violence operates as an enforcement mechanism of hegemonic masculinity, suppressing men who embody 'subordinate' masculinities—those unwilling to perform aggression or confrontation.

Inspired by the Anchor of Justice, Hank retaliates against Mock Beak and recovers his father's stolen jade pendant. However, his decision to fight without a mask enables Mock Beak to recognise him, and in revenge, the gang murders his father. This tragic outcome exemplifies Connell's assertion that violence is not merely a privilege but often functions as a means of claiming or defending social power, asserting superiority, and gaining advantage ("On Hegemonic Masculinity" 94). In this context, violence becomes the currency of male ego, which asserts dominance over moral restraint.

The horrific consequences of hegemonic masculinity are amplified in the backstory of the main villain, Ten Grand, as recounted by

Fig. 5. Hank's grief after his father's death (67)

As the researchers Mohla and Neera notes, societal norms often allow women to openly express emotions like grief or fear, as they are considered naturally sensitive, whereas men are generally expected to suppress such expressions, leading most men to struggle with emotional expressiveness (4291). By expressing his grief instead of concealing it, Hank refuses to conform to these hegemonic expectations of stoic masculinity.

Hank's emotional transformation continues under the guidance of the Tortoise Spirit, who transfers allegiance from Hank's father to him with the reassurance that "<[He]'ll never get shot>" (70).

Red. Orphaned and raised by Uncle Useless, who sought '<A worthy bloodline and establish a ***new dynasty***>" (125), Ten Grand and other boys were locked in a windowless room and forced to fight to the death. Uncle Useless' declaration that "<An emperor must be strong and fierce, cunning and wise. He must prove himself peerless>" (126) crystallises a model of masculinity predicated on violence, dominance, and emotional detachment. Ten Grand's rise to power illustrates how marginalised masculinities, in competing with dominant White ideals, often overcompensate through hyperviolence to claim legitimacy and superiority.

In contrast, Hank rejects this model. After his father's death, he openly weeps (fig. 5), directly challenging the emotional suppression.

Notably, the Tortoise Spirit embodies none of the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. During the collapse of imperial rule in China in 1911, when the Dragon, Phoenix, and Tiger Spirits hesitated over their next move, the Tortoise Spirit quietly migrated westward, inhabiting Hank's father's shadow—an act that earned the contempt of the others, who cursed "<him for cowardice>" (3). Yet, it is this spirit's quiet pragmatism, rather than aggressive posturing, that shapes Hank's departure from violent, dominance-based ideals.

After this mentorship, Hank begins to actively dismantle the false equations between masculinity and dominance. The Tortoise Spirit's advice: "<. . . A fight you cannot win is still worth fighting" (84), frames heroism as an ethical stance rather than a demonstration of physical superiority. This shift is reinforced when Hank sews his own superhero costume. Sewing, a task traditionally coded as feminine, becomes here a deliberate act of self-definition, undermining gendered divisions of labour. He dons the mask, cape, and gloves he has stitched and adopts the mantle of the Green Turtle, signalling that masculine identity can be constructed outside of hegemonic norms.

The novel also acknowledges the persistence of racialised hierarchies that intersect with masculinity. When Hank encounters Detective Lawful, a White police officer, the latter dismisses Chinese American criminals as "***sneaky slant-eyed bastards***" (118), unaware that the Green Turtle is himself Chinese American. This moment illustrates Connell's insight that "Race relations may also become an integral part of the dynamic between masculinities" (81), as White men enjoys the positive traits of heroism, racialised masculinities are stigmatised and marginalised. The climactic confrontation with Ten Grand further destabilises the gendered monopoly on violence. In the villain's underground lair, his three daughters—one skilled in hand-to-hand combat, one with knives, and one with a sword (fig. 6)—demonstrate that physical prowess, bravery, and combat skill are not exclusive to men.

Fig. 6. Ten Grand's daughters displaying combat skills (109)

This subversion, however, is undercut by Ten Grand's insistence on holding a contest to choose a male successor, reflecting the enduring association of rulership and protection with masculinity, grounded in the belief that men are better suited to suppress their emotions and act with 'decisive' force.

Finally, it is revealed that the source of Ten Grand's own power is the Dragon Spirit, which has promised him that "<All [his] fights would end with [his] ***victory***>" (142). Hank defeats Ten Grand not with physical strength but with wit, conceding "<Ten Grand, you win!>" (145) to undercut the fight's premise. In doing so, Hank proves that intelligence and moral choice can define a superhero more than a brute force. In the end, despite Red's invitation to join her, Hank chooses justice over vengeance, refusing to perpetuate the cycle of violence. Hank's heroism emerges as an embodiment of a marginalised masculinity that rejects dominance and embraces ethical responsibility—qualities historically associated with femininity or racialised 'weakness'—while still fulfilling the superhero ideal that popular culture has long reserved for Whiteness.

By drawing from Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, this paper thus demonstrates how Hank's journey in *The Shadow Hero* destabilises dominant gender norms that equate masculinity with aggression, dominance, and control. Instead, Hank's moral choices embody a counter-hegemonic masculinity that integrates compassion, restraint, and justice, challenging both the racialised exclusion of non-White superheroes and the gendered assumptions embedded in the genre. The findings suggest that Yang's portrayal not only redefines the superhero archetype to include marginalised masculinities but also offers a critical intervention in the cultural narratives that uphold White, hegemonic masculinity as the heroic standard.

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