

**Inked Characters in Alison McGhee's
Tell Me A Tattoo Story and Darren Lopez'
*My Teacher Has Tattoos***

By

¹Asst. Inst. Zahraa Abdulhasan Abd Ali,

²Prof. Ansam Yaroub Khyoon

³Asst. Inst. Yousif Ali Yousif

¹zahraa.a@sc.uobaghdad.edu.iq

¹ University of Baghdad /College of Science/ /Baghdad/Iraq

²ansam.abd@cope.uobaghdad.edu.iq

**²University of Baghdad/ College of Physical Education and Sport
Science / Baghdad/ Iraq**

³yousuf.en.hum@uodiyala.edu.iq

**³University of Diyala/ College of Human Sciences/ Department of
English / Diyala/Iraq**



Abstract

Although tattooed literary characters are not new in literature, they are still in children's literature. Inked characters were nearly absent from children's books and with the dawn of the twenty first century many of them portrayed tattooed characters. The problem of the study lies in the lack of studies concerning these types of characters in children's books. The researchers aim to study inked characters in selected stories for children to show the different literary uses of tattoos in these stories, serving not only characterization but theme and symbolism as well. Two children's stories are selected for this study: *Tell Me A Tattoo Story* (2016) by Alison McGhee and *My Teacher Has Tattoos* (2023) by Darren Lopez. The researchers studied the role of the main characters' tattoos in different literary elements. In *Tell Me a Tattoo Story*, the tattoos portray the father's personality, beliefs, and aspirations while in *My Teacher Has a Tattoo*, Lopez retells his own story as a tattooed teacher and how inked people are stereotyped either as criminals or gangsters. In conclusion, characters' physical appearance namely his/ her tattoos, play an integral role not only in developing the literary character but also serving as means for portraying many literary elements like theme, allusions, symbolism to name few.

Keywords: code, cultural diversity, emblem, stereotype, symbols, race, religion.

1. Introduction

Tattoos have existed in many cultures for thousands of years (Koch, et al. 2005). They are the oldest and most widespread form of permanent body modification (Sanders, 1988). Tattooed mummies such as the Pazyryk mummy from the sixth to second century B.C. and the 5000-year-old Iceman recently discovered near the Alps (Armstrong 1991; Schildkrout 2004) prove that tattoos existed in ancient cultures. Looking back at the history of tattoos, tattooing has served diverse purposes and held various meanings across different cultures.

In ancient Greece, tattoos were used to mark slaves and criminals, with their crimes tattooed on their foreheads (Gay & Whittington, 2002). In China, tattoos were a form of punishment used to mark societal outcasts (Gilbert & Gillbert, 2000). In contrast, in Japan, tattooing was primarily for decorative purposes, adorning the body with intricate designs (Brain, 1979). In New Zealand, the Maori tribes used tattoos to showcase bravery and indicate social status within their communities. These tattoos also illustrated their ancestral lineage and rank in society (Doss & Ebesu, 2009).

Tattooing has been a form of communication throughout various contexts and periods in human history.

Tattoos serve as a unique form of self-expression, allowing individuals to narrate their stories through their skin. Similarly, in literature, authors use tattoos to reveal aspects of their characters. A character's tattoo can offer insights into their personality, past experiences, or beliefs. It can symbolize their strength, suffering, or aspirations. Children's literature and tattoos combine to create a unique form of life storytelling. While children's books are highly valued for encouraging reading and helping kids explore their world, tattoos have historically had a poor reputation.

According to Christian belief, Cain was marked by God for murdering his brother hence in historic western frames tattooed individuals are judged as being bad and in some cases are condemned as criminals and prisoners. As a matter of fact in the western world criminals and prisoners were forcibly tattooed by the authorities. In ancient Rome and Greece all perpetrators are tattooed to degrade them and to signify "judgment, ownership, impossibility of rehabilitation." (BATRIĆEVIĆ, 2020) In the late 18th century, French thieves for example were forced to bear the lily tattoo with the letter V (v for voleur) on their shoulder while in Russia prisoners are tattooed for surveillance and humiliation, in Nazi death camps prisoners are tattooed with numbers for codification signifying that they are mere numbers belonging to the state in life and in death. (BATRIĆEVIĆ, 2020). This compulsory tattooing of convicts continued for a long time before it was abolished. Ironically, once it was abolished voluntary tattooing increased immediately. Gradually tattoos spread to the public and became part of a popular culture especially in developed countries and they have either expressive functions or cosmetic uses. (BATRIĆEVIĆ, 2020)

In recent decades, tattoos have gained greater acceptance and popularity. Several scholars have documented the improvement in their social status over the years: Margo DeMello (2000) describes it as a renaissance of tattooing, and Mary Kosut (2014) refers to it as the artification of tattoos, both authors agree that in recent years, tattoos have evolved into more valued and refined cultural expressions, carrying both literal and symbolic meanings. Scholars like Robert Arp (2012) and Karin Beeler (2006) believe that tattoos are a unique form of body modification because they allow individuals to express their identity and sense of self.

The problem of the study lies in the lack of academic researches that concentrate on these inked types of characters in children's books. In Iraq, researchers rarely analyze children's stories dismissing them as being a simplified type of literature let alone analyzing the literary portrayal of inked characters in them.

The researchers aim to study inked characters in two famous stories for children that has main inked character to show the different literary uses of tattoos in these stories, serving not only characterization but theme and symbolism as well. Two children's stories are selected for this research : *Tell Me A Tattoo Story* (2016) by Alison McGhee and *My Teacher Has Tattoos* (2023) by Darren Lopez.

2. Tell Me A Tattoo Story by Alison McGhee :

Tell Me A Tattoo Story (2016) is a children's book written by Alison McGhee, an American author of multiple novels for young readers, adult fiction, poetry, and narrative nonfiction. The book is illustrated by Eliza Wheeler. Alison McGhee explains that the story of the tattoos in the book was inspired by the real tattoos inked onto her arm. Having suffered family experiences similar to that of the characters within the book, McGhee states that her own tattoo was a reminder she looks upon every time she takes an action.

The entire book is about the father's tattoo and the story behind each and every one of them. The son asks his father to explain his tattoos and since the son is young the language is simple. The illustrations, however, give depth to the stories of each tattoo and Wheeler's creative watercolor images accompanying the text bring the father's stories to life. This writing project was based on McGhee's knowledge and first-hand experience with tattoos. She remarks that while other tattoos are about the art, the "Be Kind" tattoo is about the message. McGhee further explained that after writing the text, the illustrator crafted images to accompany the story. In the book, the father in the story mentions attributing the words to his grandfather, acting as a father to a son whose physical appearance resembles that of McGhee's son.

In Alison McGhee's picture book, *Tell Me a Tattoo Story*, the father says, "You wanna see my tattoos? Why, little man, you always want to see my tattoos. Here we go then." (McGee,2016) It seems that the young boy repeatedly asks his father to share the

stories behind his tattoos and the father is always willing to tell them. Each tattoo holds a unique tale that the father lovingly recounts to his curious son, his memories, experiences, and emotions related to the tattoo. Hence, the father takes his son and the readers as well on a beautiful journey to learn more about his family's history.

A) The Mountain Dragon

The first tattoo is that of the mountain dragon inked on his father's shoulder. The boy recognizes that the mountain dragon tattooed on his father's shoulder is from his favorite childhood book and brings back memories of the boy's grandmother reading it loudly. Dragons are universally recognized as symbols of strength, power, and protection. A dragon tattoo, especially a mountain dragon, indicates that he values these qualities and perhaps sees them as an integral part of his identity. It symbolize his role as a protector of his family and loved ones. Mountains are often associated with stability, endurance, and a sense of eternity. A dragon associated with a mountain symbolize resilience, indicating that the father has faced challenges and obstacles with determination and strength (Stevenson,2016). The tattoo serves both as a reminder of his perseverance and as a tribute to the enduring power of the human spirit.

Dragons are often depicted as wise, ancient creatures in mythology, often acting as guardians of treasure or sacred knowledge. This aspect of the tattoo can represent the father's wisdom and role as a guide or teacher, especially to his child. It may also symbolize the values and lessons he wishes to impart. Mountain dragon images combine elements of nature (mountains) and mythology (dragons). This connection may reflect the father's love of nature, his appreciation for the mysteries and beauty of the natural world, or his interest in mythology and storytelling (Skutlin, 2019).

The bodily inscription is the representative of the values the father is eager to inculcate in the child. It can open the discussion where the father will be able to tell the meaning of the dragon and mountain symbols and how they are connected to him. As much as using a logo, the tendenz is visually appealing and elicits the relevant physiological response of a lion's roar. It also can create an anticipation in the child and to the reader, learn more and discover something new about admiration, which makes the story more interesting (McGee,2016).

The image of the mountain dragon on the father's shoulder represents many values as energy, endurance, knowledge, and relatedness to natural powers and myths.

It represents the father's character and morality, which creates profound connotations of protection and direction. It is not only a symbol that the father has tattooed, but it is also an attitude to depict for further improvement by the child and the father alike. (Skutlin, 2019).

B) Be Kind tattoo:

The second tattoo, "Be Kind," stands for a father's desire to impart the knowledge that his father once gave to him to the generations to come. It emphasizes hospitality as the key value that the family members have always been proud of. "In this case "Be kind" can be said to be one of the cornerstones in the life of the father. It symbolizes his tendency toward people and his ideas of equal treatment. (McGee, 2016) It introduces the theme of compassion as one of the values by which people define and form themselves and their relationships. He should live by this principle every day, and this tattoo serves as the best reminder to him. The tattoo reflects the father's desire to pass on some of the worth, belief, and attitude to his son. Therefore, getting this tattoo symbolizes the appreciation of the father and the influence the words had on his life. He acknowledges the passing on of generations and pays respect to them, as well as the importance of the experiences that were passed down. (DeMello, 2000)

Furthermore, the father carved this tattoo on his skin to pay tribute to his father and how his father's words positively impacted his life. He honors the values of the past, their capacity to teach him, and his appreciation of what was learned earlier. This tattoo is highly relevant to the external appearance of the father (McGee, 2016). It symbolizes the embodiment of one of the family's most important values as well as his intentions of practicing this value toward others. Within the book context, this tattoo is viewed as the means for the father to pass one of the critical aspects of his life principles to his child. In essence, it prompts a conversation on equally fundamental aspects of quality and its capability to transform the world for the better. The tattoo also plays a pivotal role in strengthening the emotional attachment of the father with his son since the son can understand the values that the father holds so dear. (DeMello, 2000)

The simple yet profound message of "Be Kind" is visually striking. It stands out as a clear and powerful statement embodying a universal value. Emotionally, it conveys a sense of warmth, compassion, and the importance of positive actions. This tattoo underscores themes of kindness and compassion central to the story (Atkinson, 2003).

It also highlights the importance of considering and empathizing with others. Additionally, the tattoo touches on themes of family and legacy. It emphasizes how values and wisdom are passed down through generations, shaping the character and actions of family members. (Atkinson, 2003)

C) Ferris Wheel Tattoo :

The third tattoo on the father's upper arm is of fireworks and a Ferris wheel that reminds him of a pretty girl: "This one? This one reminds me of the day I met a pretty girl." (McGee, 2016). This tattoo symbolizes meaningful and joyous moments in the protagonist's life with the woman he loved. As mentioned earlier, the tattoos on the father's body tell stories of the father's life and each one holds a piece of history, a cherished memory, or a significant moment. Designs like flowers, fireworks, and a Ferris wheel represent a particularly joyful and formative period. The flowers in the tattoo symbolize a time of growth and beauty in the parent's life. It could be the summer when they found love or made lasting friendships. Flowers also represent the natural beauty of a special place they have visited, where they felt a deep connection to the world around them. (Atkinson, 2003).

The Ferris wheel often symbolizes fun, excitement, and the cyclical nature of life. This story represents an unforgettable day at the Café del'amour, a moment of pure joy shared with loved ones. The ups and downs of the Ferris wheel can also metaphorically reflect the highs and lows of life's journey, symbolizing the resilience and joy found in simple pleasures. Fireworks are universally recognized as symbols of celebration and awe (McGee, 2016). In a tattoo, they represent significant life events that brought great joy and excitement. This could include national holidays like the Fourth of July, personal achievements, or unforgettable nights filled with laughter and celebration. Fireworks also symbolize triumph, overcoming challenges, celebrating victories, fleeting beauty, the transient yet memorable nature of some life moments, and cherished memories. These moments are special in one's heart (Vail & Sanders, 2009).

Combining these elements, the tattoo tells the story of a "Summer of Joy." It could reflect a particular summer that stands out in the parent's memory, marked by love, growth, celebration, and fun. This design serves as a visual reminder of those beautiful times and the emotions they evoked. By sharing the story of this tattoo with their child, the parent imparts lessons about appreciating life's simple pleasures,

celebrating achievements, and valuing moments of growth and beauty. The intimate sharing of tattoo stories deepens the emotional bond between the parent and child. The child learns about his parent's past, the experiences that shaped them, and the values they hold dear. (Vail & Sanders, 2009). With its vibrant and joyful images, this tattoo teaches the child how to find and celebrate beauty in their own life's journey.

D) Middle Eastern Desert Landscape Tattoo :

The fourth tattoo is the tattoo of a Middle Eastern Desert Landscape. The desert set symbolizes the father's period in the army in the Middle East. The physical appearance of his walking through the desert brings out the physical and emotional mountain that he is bound to surmount. The father tells his son "Did I miss home while I was there? I sure did" (McGee, 2016). This shows such aspects as bravery, endurance, and selflessly offering services for the nation. The tattoo shows the father's unseen efforts he has been making in the army to protect his nation and the feelings of responsibility and devotion he had, even though he had to go through lots of troublesome situations. Moreover, it expresses the fellowship of comrades he shares with other soldiers and the sufferings and perhaps the past of some of the soldiers that may have been killed on duty. (Vail & Sanders, 2009).

The positions sponsored by the desert may indicate a stage of the individual's metamorphosis. Deserts are sometimes regarded as a place where one is put through difficult physical conditions that can make one become a different person. This tattoo symbolizes the father's transformation by the experiences and rising up stronger as well as wiser (Vail & Sanders, 2009). Thus, it is possible to state that getting this tattoo helps the father express his respect to the time spent in the military and its influence on his life. It is a way of vouching and paying respect to all those who lived through that difficult time. It clears his memory of his comrades he had worked with and general working experiences, particularly in the deserts of the Middle East.

The father uses his tattoo to share his life experiences with his child. The desert landscape tattoo is a means for him to express the significance of his service and its importance. It deepens the bond between father and child, allowing the child to learn about the father's past and powerful experiences that have shaped him. Through this tattoo, values like bravery, sacrifice, and resilience are passed on to the child,

emphasizing the value of honoring commitments and cherishing memories. The child gains insight into the father's legacy of service. (McGee,2016)

The image of a desert scene in the Middle East elicits emotions in viewers, portraying the demanding environment where the father once lived. It encapsulates his journey and its profound impact on his life, serving as a reminder of his history. The tattoo evokes feelings of pride, nostalgia, and reverence, symbolizing not only his story but also deep emotions tied to his military service (McGee, 2016). By weaving this into her narrative, Alison McGhee underscores how personal histories shape individuals through their experiences. It holds significance in the story, adding depth to the father's narrative and strengthening his bond with his child.

E) The Heart Tattoo :

The last tattoo, The Heart Tattoo with the Boy's Birthday, "Just a little heart, is all. Those numbers inside it? Just somebody's birthday, I guess. Whose birthday?" (McGee, 2016). The heart symbolizes love, and by placing it over his own heart, the father expresses the deep and unconditional love he has for his son. It shows that his son holds a special place in his heart, both literally and figuratively. The tattoo of the boy's birthdate inside the heart highlights the importance of that day in the father's life. It represents the day his son was born, one of the most significant and joyful events for him. This date is a constant reminder of the joy and fulfillment his son brings to his life (Pitts, 2003).

By getting this tattoo, the father shows the strong bond he shares with his son. It signifies that his son is always with him, close to his heart, and that their relationship is an integral part of his identity. The tattoo also represents the memories and achievements associated with his son's life. It serves as a reminder of watching his son grow, the milestones they celebrated together, and the memories they created. This tattoo symbolizes the father's commitment to his family and the inheritance of love he wishes to pass down to future generations. It shows his dedication to being a loving and caring father and his importance to family. (Pitts, 2003).

The father's tattoo serves as a way to share his life's journey with his child. The heart tattoo with the boy's birthdate is particularly meaningful because it directly involves the child and emphasizes their emotional connection. The image of the heart with the inscribed date is simple yet powerful, conveying deep emotions. It visually

represents the father's genuine love and the significance of his son's birth. It evokes feelings of warmth, security, and belonging, highlighting the emotional depth of the father – son relationship. The heart tattoo embodies the themes of love and family central to the narrative. Tattoos in the story serve as markers of identity and memory. This particular tattoo represents how the father's identity is intertwined with his role as a parent and how his love for his son shapes his memories and experiences.

The heart tattoo with the boy's birthdate in Alison McGhee's *Tell Me a Tattoo Story* symbolizes the father's deep and unconditional love for his son. It marks the significance of the son's birth, their strong bond, and the father's commitment to the family. This tattoo, close to the father's heart, serves as a powerful and lasting symbol of love and connection, enriching the narrative with its emotional and visual impact.

3. My Teacher Has Tattoos (2023) by Darren Lopez

This story is based on real the authors' personal experience as tattooed elementary teacher in a Puerto Rican private school. Lopez not only skillfully portrays this experience; he offers an educational insight about tattoos.

The story is about an inked teacher who is stereotyped as a bad man because of his tattoos. Students and parents alike express their concern regarding the teacher's tattoos believing that only gangsters and people who were in jail have tattoos. When confronted by the students, Mr Mendoza, the teacher and their baseball coach, explained three of his tattoos to the children and he only chose the tattoos on his arms that he knew his students could see when he wears sleeveless sportswear. He explained the cultural significance of his tattoos giving the children a new prospective for inked individuals.

Darren Lopez gradually introduces the reader to the stereotyping of tattooed individuals. Bhagya Madanasinghe, the Illustrator, skillfully portrays African American tattooed gangster that Xavier and his mother encounter on his way home to justify why such inked individuals should be feared. Xavier's mother is terrified of those tattooed men and she teaches her son to fear them as well by consistently stating "tattoos are for people who have been in jail Xavier" and in another incident she told

him “don’t look, they’re probably in a dangerous gang.” (Lopez, *My Teacher Has A Tattoo*, 2023)

Lopez, like his reflection Mr. Mendoza, holds a bachelor degree in anthropology, teaches math to 5th grade elementary students, a Yankees’ fan, baseball coach, and is tattooed all over. In an interview with Lopez he is asked how he felt about his tattoos in a school setting he answered “my first year teaching in Puerto Rico I definitely hid the tattoos with fear of revealing them” (CMoorehead, 2023) after that he started explaining them a matter that encouraged him to write this story. Lopez continues saying that he still has to cover his tattoos because of “the stigma that was once held against tattooed people.” Furthermore, he painfully describes the “elevator treatment,” that is people’s reaction to him once they see his tattoos : “in my personal life, I have gotten the elevator treatment where people will hold their belongings close to them as we share the elevator.” On many occasions he was believed to be an outlaw because of his tattoos :

During Covid, I was taking things out of my house through the front door without a shirt on and I had the cops called on my for being suspicious tattooed individual in the neighborhood...I’m not sure which neighbor called the police on me but I had to show proof that I owned my house which was upsetting. (CMoorehead, 2023)

Although many countries prohibit teachers from having tattoos, there are no official laws in the United States of America against teachers having tattoos. However, many public and private schools, especially elementary schools, have strict policies regarding tattooed teachers. (Jenks, 2016) Since the equality act in the USA does not protect tattooed individuals, schools as well as any other organizations can discriminate against tattooed individuals. The general concern is that teachers are role models thus they can’t be stereotyped according to their tattoos. In some schools that do tolerate tattooed teachers, they are required to cover these tattoos especially if they are offensive, obscene or a source of distraction for students. This is artfully illustrated in the story for we see Mr. always wearing long sleeved white shirt that covers all his tattoos. As individuals, teacher can express their personalities, beliefs and values through body arts yet they are judged negatively as being unprofessional. (Santiago, 2020)

Xavier cannot believe that his teacher is a criminal or a gangster simply because he drinks coffee and he is an athlete. Mr. Mendoza is a devoted Yankees fan and a baseball coach and tattoos are normal among athletes. Professional athletes have visible tattoos and they try hard to show them off whenever there is an opportunity. Athletes have tattoos for many reasons; show their strength, express their personal values and to show their affiliation to a certain group. (Kluger, 2018) Xavier confronted his teacher in front of class asking him to roll up his sleeves and explain why is he tattooed and what does his tattoos mean. Mr. Mendoza shows the students three of his visible tattoos: the Saraswati Tattoo, the three faces of his ancestors, and the Borneo flower tattoo.

A) The Saraswati Tattoo:

Mr. Mendoza introduces the students to his first tattoo on his left hand explaining that the tattoo is of Saraswati; the Hindus goddess of education. (See appendix A). He does not explain anything further leaving his students as well as his readers curious to learn not only about Hinduism but also about this goddess and her significance. Hinduism is one of the oldest belief systems in the world originating in Central Asia and the Indus Valley. The supreme creator from whom all creation emerged is Brahman. Brahman guides his creation through a scriptures known as the Vedas. (Mark, 2024) This belief system although very old, complex, and based on oral stories is in fact considered the “world third – largest religion” after Islam and Christianity. (Wikipedia, Hindusim , 2024).

Saraswati, also called Sarasvati, is a Hindu goddess of learning, arts especially music, patroness of letters, the inventor of Sanskrit Language. (Cartwright, 2024) Her name means the one who flows referring to the flow of thoughts, words, and music like the flow of the river. She is a river goddess thus is believed to be the personification of the sacred river Sarasvati. (Britannica, 2024) She symbolizes creation, purification, and nourishment like water. She is usually presented wearing white or yellow riding a white goose ready to fly yet in modern art representations the goose is replaces with a white swan or a lotus. The goddess is depicted as having four arms with each arm representing one aspect of human personality related to learning: in the first arm she holds a book, Vedas that symbolizes her flawless understating of the scriptures thus mastering universal, divine, eternal knowledge. (Cartwright, 2024) In the second arm she holds a garland (mala) of white pearls symbolizing spirituality and the power of meditation

while in the third arm she holds a pot of sacred water, symbolizes her abilities of creation and purification. Finally on the forth arm she holds a vena, musical instrument, symbolizing her mastery of all arts and sciences. (Britannica, 2024)

It seems that Mr. Mendoza is referring to the Hindus in Bali Island of Indonesia judging from his two other tattoos. Accordingly, Saraswati is worshiped by Balinese Hindus in a festival called Sawaswati Puja held in January and February during students' exams because she is believed to give long life, success, and removes speech defects. (Britannica, 2024)

Madanasinghe beautifully portrays this tattoo in two different settings; the first is on Mr. Mendoza's forearm showing a brown mask representing the goddess and second illustrates the goddess in her vibrant colorful setting. (See Appendix A) The illustrations definitely gives an age – appropriate understanding of the tattoo as Darren stated in one of his interviews:

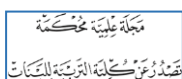
The most challenging part of telling this story was learning that not all the details need to be said in words because the illustrations also help tell the story. As a storyteller, I am used to being very descriptive with everything so a visual is created in the reader's mind, but picture books help with illustrations. (CMoorehead, 2023)

B) The Three Faces Tattoo

Tattooed on his right arm three faces each belongs to one his ancestors Taino, African, and Spanish. (See Appendix B) Since it was difficult to search for the tattoo without knowing its name and origin, the researchers contacted Darren Lopez via Instagram who kindly offered the following an explanation:

In Puerto Rico, we say we are one people of three races..the center face is of Oduduwa, the founder of the Yoruba Culture in Nigeria, the indigenous face is of Taina woman, indigenous people of the Caribe, and the other is a Spanish “conquistador.” (Lopez, 2024)

Since Lopez is a proud Puerto Rican, he wears his cultural diversity on his skin. Puerto Rico is a Caribbean Island that consists of many large and small islands that are inhabited by successions of people including Taino before being colonized by Spain in



1493. (Wikipedia, 2024) It remained under the power of the Spanish Empire, therefore it hosted African slaves and settlers from Canary Islands and Andalusia before becoming a territory of the United States. This history gave it a wide cultural diversity that created a unique identity; a fusion of indigenous, African, European, and American elements. (Hernández-Acosta, 2013) Lopez honored each of his three races, the Taino, African, and Spanish through his tattoos. The Taino race is symbolized by the Taino woman face tattoo. Taino people are the indigenous of the Caribbean and the researchers believe that Darren chose a Taino woman tattoo not a man simply because he is descendant from Taino and those who descend from Taino actually have Taino DNA that proves they descended from direct female line. (Fox, 2003) The African race is symbolized by the tattoo of Oduduwa, a divine king and a legendary founder and creator of Yoruba religion. (Wikipedia, Oduduwa, 2024) The people of Yoruba are West African ethnic group whom inhabit Nigeria, Benin, and Togo yet the majority of Yoruba population inhabit Nigeria. According to Yoruba religion Oduduwa is believed to be sent from heavens to create earth on waters. The Spanish race is symbolized by the third tattoo of the Spanish conquistador, representing the colonists who sailed to Puerto Rico during the early modern period and established their colonies and founded trade routes.

C) The Bungai Terung tattoo

The last tattoo that Mr. Mendoza shows to the children is the bungai terung tattoo that is translated to eggplant Borneo flower worn by male members of Iban ethnic group in Sarawak. Mr. Mendoza tells his students that this flower represent “lifelong journey for knowledge and wisdom.” (Lopez, My Teacher Has A Tattoo, 2023) It is an eight petal flower with eight small sepals and double spiral in the center. The tattoo consists of three main parts; the petals (the leaves), the sepals (the thorns), and the double spiral (the heart). (See appendix C) The spiral represent robes of life and it is also a representation of a tadpole belly; initiation into manhood. This tattoo is worn on both shoulders of a male member of Iban before going for Berjalai, the rite for passage. Males receive this tattoo after circumcision marking their sexual maturation and their readiness to travel far away from their village before returning to their home. (Jumpe, 2020)

Darren here sheds the light on Indonesian Iban people from Borneo Island portraying all its cultural heritage in a tattoo. Iban people are ethnic group described as

being fearless warriors who proudly wear their cultural heritage on their skin. Darren admires this tribe because, like him, they preserve their oral literature using their bodies as canvas. Tattoos for the Iban tribe is their identity and life long journey and those who do not have many adventures do not have many tattoos for they are considered as jewelry that not everyone can have.(Pawanteh)

Mr. Mendoza ends by stating that “tattoos are important for many cultures, they have been adapted in Americas as art, but that are a part of a person’s journey in life.” (Lopez, *My Teacher Has A Tattoo*, 2023) Three tattoos yet many lessons to be learned other than rejecting stereotyping. As mentioned earlier, the Americas did adapt tattoos as an art while in other cultures they represent their religious beliefs, cultural costumes, social statements, political significance, legendary idles, role models, personal challenges and aspirations, and much more.

4. Conclusions :

Tattoos played an integral role in both narratives, giving depth to the characters as well as providing insights into various literary elements. In the first story, *Tell Me A Tattoo Story*, the tattoos are highly personal and are related directly to the protagonist’s feelings, attitudes, and experiences. Four tattoos each represent different aspects of the father’s characterization. First the mountain dragon tattoo that symbolizes the father’s personality being protective as the dragon and filled with energy, endurance, knowledge, and relatedness to natural powers. The second tattoo shows his attitude towards others in which the ‘Be kind’ tattoo incarnates his kindness and compassion to family and to all people. It also highlights the importance of passing on a great legacy. The third tattoo shows his love for his wife, symbolizing the summer of his emotional life where he met his soul mate, the boy’s mother. This tattoo symbolizes the importance of making a family based on love because life will be like a Ferris wheel; in spite of the ups and downs it is fun and rich with sparkling achievements, just like fireworks. The desert tattoo portrays the father’s patriotic belief manifested in his enrollment in the army, while the last tattoo shows the son’s place in his father’s heart.

In *My Teacher Has Tattoos*, the tattoos are highly cultural and religious. Although they show the teacher’s personal beliefs they reflect a wide range of cultures and religions. The main theme of the story is to reject stereotyping of tattooed

individuals, yet there are many lessons to be learned. The child learns that not all tattooed individuals are bad and that being true to your origins is highly appreciative. Individuals can respect, learn, and get inspired by different cultures and follow different religions as long as they all lead to making a better person.

The researchers recommend making more researchers on children's literature to provide insights and guidelines for parents to pay attention to while introducing stories to the children.

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Appendix (A)

Saraswati Tattoo



Appendix B

The three faces tattoo



Appendix C

The Bungai Terung Tattoo

