How does the protagonist of No-No boy negotiate an identity as a second-generation Japanese-American in a divided America?

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Contents

Introduction

John Okada's *No-No Boy* follows the story of Ichiro Yamada, a second-generation Japanese-American (more commonly known as *Nisei*) who finds himself caught up by cultural conflicts between the East and the West as he struggles to adjust himself to a post-war American society. When the United States entered World War Two (WWII), over 120,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned and sent to internment camps and young men of drafting age were forced to complete a "loyalty questionnaire". By foregrounding his novel as *No-No Boy,* Okada brings the readers' attention to those who answered in the double-negative to the two key questions, 27 and 28: *whether Nisei men were willing to serve on combat duty wherever ordered?*; *if individuals would swear unqualified allegiance to the United States and forswear any form of allegiance to the Emperor of Japan?* (Cherstin 1). The two intentionally misleading and complex nature of the questions led many Japanese-Americans to answer negatively, thereby leading to the cultural ostracization against these Japanese-Americans in American society, and even the other *Nisei* who decided to be drafted. Thus, such cultural ostracization can be seen as a form of punishment against those Japanese-Americans who failed to abide by the American societies' expected social obligations, leading to the moniker *No-No Boy,* the crystallized term that mirrors the contempt and mistreatment endured by this particular group of Japanese-Americans in post-war America.

Throughout the novel, Okada creates the protagonist Ichiro Yamada as a vehicle who plunges into the "bitterly-divided *Nikkei* community, plagued with self-hatred and uncertainty in the immediate aftermath of World War II" (Yogi, 1992, 233). In *No-No Boy,* Ichiro finds himself caught up by the web of social pressures, which

renders him as a dejected existence as he faces the grappling consequences upon answering *no* to the loyalty questionnaire. By providing an honest portrayal of Ichiro's life upon the incident, Okada leads his readers to become a witness to Ichiro's fragmented sense of self as the character sees himself in light of self-denigration, abnegation and pathological dejection. This led me to wonder whether Ichiro's attitude would change by the end of the novel and whether Ichiro would be able to discover his new identity in the view of these otherwise irreconcilable conflicts. More specifically, this prompted me to form the research question of this study: *How does the protagonist of No-No Boy negotiate an identity as a second-generation Japanese-American in a divided America?*

In this study, I aim to explore Okada's *No-No Boy* as a typification of *bildungsroman*. This leads me to see *No-No Boy* as a novel that details Ichiro's poignant journey of self-construction as he constantly efforts himself to mediate between the imposing Western values and cultures and his identity as the second-generation of the defeated nation, Japan. In order to explore Ichiro's journey of self-construction in a clearer light, this study aims to discuss the Japanese-Americans' multifarious perspectives regarding the subject of war, particularly through the inter-familial relationships, personal relationships and interaction between No-No boys and other *Nisei.*

Through his path to assimilate to post-war American society and form his new identity, the following study highlights how Ichiro's interaction with fellow Japanese-Americans is a focal point in regards to the construction and development of his new identity, and how it allows him to gain a greater understanding of his character. The

process of maturing is also achieved through Ichiro's attempts to reconcile the animosity between the conflicting views the different people in his journey possess. The study utilizes the aid of scholarly secondary sources to bolster the approach that is taken throughout the paper.

Ichiro and Japanese Influences

In *No-No Boy,* Okada explores Ichiro's complicated relationship with his mother to establish the stark contrast between the *Issei* and *Nisei*, thereby highlighting the dysfunctional familial relationship as a result of WWII and its calamitous effects upon Ichiro's construction of self. As Okada begins with his novel, he describes Mrs. Yamada, Ichiro's mother as an *Issei* (a first-generation immigrant from Japan) who is "a rock of hate" (Okada 21) against all American ideals. She refuses to believe that Japan was defeated in the war and denounces the defeat as "a trick of the Americans" (Okada 35) and openly "declares her allegiance to the Japanese emperor" (Ling 364). Okada uses Mrs. Yamada as a character who mirrors post-war sentiments among the *Issei* community as they are embittered by the shame of defeat. Through constant moments of hatred and cynical criticisms, Okada explores the effects of shame upon an individual as Mrs. Yamada's identity is impaired in the face of Japan's wartime defeat. She "categorizes everything as either 'Japanese' or 'American'" (Yogi, 1992, 236), and by interpreting how her family's actions reflected her – by extension deducing that Ichiro's wartime choices were a source of pride, she believes that he locked-in his choice to be "Japanese" over "American". Furthermore, her refusal to believe the plethora of evidence in front of her regarding Japan's loss in the form of pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, insisting that he "must be mistaken because Japan didn't lose the war" (Okada 22) and that ships sent by Japan would soon pick

them up paints her as delusional to the reader. Additionally, Mrs. Yamada cuts all contact with other families who are not fiercely nationalistic like her, instead opting to share her delusions with like-minded *Issei* such as the Ashida family, declaring that "[Other families] don't understand that Japan didn't lose the war because Japan didn't lose" (Okada 24).

The simple-minded train of thought and austerity of Mrs. Yamada and her fervent denunciation of everything "American" nurtures "Ichiro's self-hatred [that] grows into hatred of his mother" (Ling 368) and how he "think[s] [his] mother is to blame" (Okada 137). Ichiro believes that Mrs. Yamada's ethnic pride is the thing that prevents him from fully integrating into American popular culture, thus also being the source of his sufferings and existential crisis – "Everything, it seemed, stemmed back to her" (Okada 182). Ichiro chooses to disparage his mother as he believes she "made inevitable [his] mistake" (Okada 166). A reason why Ichiro chooses to do so may be because of his mother's "implacable faith" in his choice regarding the loyalty questionnaire, leading to Ichiro "find[ing] it impossible to discuss with her the fact that he regrets saying 'no-no'" (Cheung and Peterson 202). As a maternal figure, Mrs. Yamada is supposed to care for her child, however, her "inability to express either her pride of her grievances in terms relevant to Ichiro" (Ling 368) and her "rock-hard, unloving, destructive dominance" (McDonald 21) presents to the reader a Japanese loyalist who is "deprived of the ability to communicate and [is] isolated from social realities", unable to assimilate to American culture and "express either her pride or her grievances in terms relevant to Ichiro's situation [which] renders her utterly ineffectual as a moral advisor" (Ling 365, 368). Unlike *Issei* such as his mother who possess a perpetual theme of self-hatred, guilt, and shame, Ichiro is not burdened with the first-

hand shame that accompanies the *Issei*, and therefore establishes his own sense of identity, unlike his mother who is engulfed by her patriotism to Japan.

Okada suggests to the reader that Ichiro cannot fully assimilate to Japanese culture through Mrs. Yamada's suicide. Afore her death, Ichiro is pressured to adopt a nationalistic attitude akin to that of his mother's as he feels that she is the only one that supported his decision to reject the draft, her pride being "an indication of his complete identification with Japanese culture" (Ling 368). Japanese familial bonds stipulate that the son heed the parent, which incentivizes Ichiro to adopt his mother's nationalist Japanese attitudes despite the relational discord present. However, Ichiro is "inexorably drawn toward an identification with America" (Kim 72) and reflects that "one is not born in America and raised in America and taught in America and one does not speak and swear and drink and smoke in American streets and houses without becoming American and loving it" (Okada 16). In addition to the discrimination of *No-No* boys by other *Nisei* and even African-Americans, Ichiro feels pressured to assimilate to American culture, opting to "put all blame on his mother" (Ling 368), feeling that she is the driving force behind his inability to assimilate as the novel progresses. Mrs. Yamada's suicide suggests that "the loyalist is not a sustaining imago in the ideological setting faced by Japanese-Americans" (Cheung and Peterson 202), connoting that Ichiro is unable to survive in post-war America as a Japanese loyalist.

Ichiro and Western Influences

As the novel progresses, Ichiro's continuous attempts to reconcile himself with the broader American community as a *No-No* boy reflects from his interactions with the other *Nisei*. In the novel, Okada characterizes Kenji Kanno, a *Yes-Yes* boy, as a character foil to the ostracized Ichiro. The reader learns that he is "sympathetic to Ichiro's plight" (Cheung and Peterson 200) and that he is a wounded war veteran who suffers from a terminal war wound. Because Ichiro did not fight in the army like the majority of other *Nisei*, he is labelled a "traitor" and considers himself to be useless to society, with "his post-war existence in American society… a lingering death" (Ling 367). Ichiro's embedded sense of shame and humiliation in the face of being labelled a *No-No Boy* leads him to compare himself to Kenji, who conversely is labelled a warrior and patriot by the populace due to his involvement in the war. The harrowing experience of war and prison inflict deep wounds to both friends, one physically and the other mentally – the bond between the two men is strengthened by this realization. However, Ichiro's insistence of self-deprecation is still prevalent through his reflection "A leg more or less wasn't important when compared with himself, Ichiro, who was strong and perfect but only an empty shell" (Okada 55). His stubborn belief that only having fought in the war was one worthy of living, such as Kenji who "was a veteran of the Army of America and had every right to laugh and love and hope" (Okada 58). Ichiro recognizes that Kenji's physical wound may eventually lead to his death, however he still "perceives his spiritual wound as more egregious" (Kim 68). Ichiro's envy of Kenji's status in post-war American society because of his choices leads to him concluding:

> "I'll change with you, Kenji, [Ichiro] thought. Give me the stump which gives you the right to hold your head high. Give me the eleven inches which are beginning to hurt again and bring ever closer the fear of approaching death, and give me with it the fullness of yourself which is also yours because you were man enough to wish the thing which destroyed your leg and, perhaps, you with it but, at the same time, made it so that you can put your one good foot in the dirt of America and know that the wet coolness of it is yours beyond a single doubt." (Okada 58-59)

Kenji's wartime injury symbolizes "the costs, both physical and psychological, of *Nikkei* efforts to prove loyalty" (Yogi, 1992, 240). To prove their loyalty to the American populace, the *Nisei* population is often expected to endure American-induced character assassination, a gradual abolition of loyalty to the belonged country. In Kenji's case, his amputated limb and his very life would become the necessary sacrifices called for to highlight his loyalty for America. Despite Kenji's expensive sacrifices for America, Ichiro sees him as a martyr of assimilationist ideals and values. Through establishing Ichiro's unwavering envy for Kenji, he portrays him as a heroic figure who ultimately sacrifices his life for America and dies a hero. Ichiro's readiness and desire to embrace these values is useful for readers to see and sympathize with "the crushing weight of assimilationist pressures during and after the war" (Ling 367) inflicted to the *Nisei* community.

Okada furthers his exploration on the notion of suppressed cultural identity through Ichiro's pernicious relationships with multiple *Nisei Yes-Yes* boys. While both *No-No* boys and *Yes-Yes* boys share the same ethnic identity, their deciding

difference lies in the latter's readily acceptance of "social standards established by the dominant [American] culture" (Ling 364). In the novel, the *Yes-Yes* boys often resort to the racist epithet "Jap", such as "That's a Jap, fellas/ Does it talk? / Say no-no in Jap. You oughta be good at that" to address Ichiro as they intend to humiliate him. Such discriminatory, derogatory treatment brings readers to see the *Yes-Yes* boys' necessity to employ racist epithets and remarks in order to differentiate themselves from the *No-No* boys due to shared ethnicity, culture and traits. In order to distinguish themselves from the disgraceful *No-No* boys, these *Yes-Yes* boys choose to adopt racist conventions and develop social ostracization as a means to attain self-security. As Ichiro enters the Club Oriental, Bull, a "belligerent and hyper-patriotic Japanese American veteran" (Entin 101) ridicules Ichiro's attire as he says, "no-no boys don't look so good without the striped uniform" (Okada 69). Through placing Ichiro, the *No-No* boy, as the subject of blame and humiliation, Bull's verbal violence against Ichiro highlights his insecurities stemming from "social and political dillemma[s]" (Ling 369). He exploits Ichiro, utilizing him as a scapegoat to validate his own sense of identity. In this regard, Okada showcases the multi-faceted problems encountered by the *No-No Nisei* - that they are often victimized by the American populace and exploited by the other *Yes-Yes Nisei* which acts as an impediment towards cultural integration and assimilation with the American society. As a result, Ichiro's rejection by other *Nisei* and the wider American populus inhibits his integration and assimilation into American society.

Ichiro's Assimilation

Ichiro's formation of self-identity progresses through the novel via his interactions with different characters who indirectly help him understand more about himself. Through Emi, a *Nisei* girl introduced by Kenji to Ichiro who adopts a maternal figure in place of Mrs. Yamada, Ichiro finds a maternal figure who nurtures and advises him when needed and has "a deep capacity for systemic identification" (Kim 74) – something that Mrs. Yamada was unable to provide to him physically and mentally. She offers Ichiro "intimacy, sex, and an earnest faith in American generosity" (Entin 95), also providing Ichiro with an outlet to which he shares the burden of his carried pain. Whilst Ichiro's first interaction with Emi was full of self-deprecation and loathing, the last time they interact is "a symbolic celebration of life after Ma's suicide" (Ling 371). Emi influences Ichiro's thought process, acting as a catalyst for his healing process stemming from her acceptance of him being a *No-No* boy, nurturing feelings of self-forgiveness and realization within Ichiro. Resultant of her caring attitude and advice, Ichiro is able to recognize the "mistake" he made when answering in the double-negative to the Selective Service Questionnaire and therefore is able to "admit" to his mistake, stating that he has "paid for [his] crime as prescribed by law" and that "he has been forgiven" (Okada 205), allowing Ichiro to exit the self-deprecating loop that he was previously subject to because of his changed perspective of his predicament.

Furthermore, Emi provides Ichiro with the chance to overturn his life in post-war America and "buy a home and love [his] family" (Okada 48), something that Ichiro considered impalpable at the start of the novel, demonstrating to the reader the healing aspects of Emi's maternal influence and the benefits of Ichiro's changed mindset – he

is able to think more long-term and explore avenues of life separate from established community preconceptions. Moreover, through Ichiro's and Emi's dancing at a restaurant after his mother's suicide, Ichiro "sees that there is a place for people as diverse as Emi" through Okada's use of the dance floor as a "metaphor for America" (Yogi, 1992, 242) and dancing being symbolic of "the constant cooperation and respect necessary to maintain a truly pluralistic nation" (Yogi, 1992, 242) where *Nisei* are able to exist in harmony without discrimination and ostracization to one another. As Emi's advice challenges Ichiro's previous misconceptions and assumptions of society, Ichiro begins to forgo the past where he is burdened by historical pain and prejudice. He accepts Emi's "softened version of the discourse that tend[ed] to create and to entrap" (Ling 371) Ichiro in his self-deprecation loops where he continuously agonized about his treatment from society as an outcast *No-No* boy. With Emi's maternal influence and guidance, Ichiro is able to experience love, be guided morally and protected such that he is no longer able to be locked up in his guilt and self-deprecation, instead being able to think differently than he once did, leading him to be able to come to different conclusions for the multi-faceted problems that he is subjected to by the Japanese-American community.

Another character that plays a substantial part in Ichiro's healing process is Mr. Carrick, who leads a small engineering firm and "expresses an avuncular benevolence towards Ichiro" (Kim 73). The reader learns that Mr. Carrick is sympathetic to the plight of *No-No* boys such as Ichiro, referring to the treatment of Japanese-Americans by the government as "A big black mark in the annals of American history" (Okada 134). To Ichiro, Mr. Carrick contrasts with the vast majority of the American populace who loathed *No-No* boys; unlike them, Mr. Carrick understood and sympathized to the

predicament that Ichiro was going through. Mr. Carrick is described as “the kind of American that Americans always profess themselves to be” (Okada 151), which serves to accentuate the importance of the actions he was taking. By going out of his way to hire Japanese-Americans such as Ichiro and offering them above-market wages, the reader infers that Mr. Carrick is doing everything he can at a personal capacity to “rectify the wrong … because he was part of the country which … had erred in a moment of panic” (Okada 136). Moreover, Mr. Carrick personally apologies to both veterans and *No-No* boys: “I am sorry… for you and for the causes behind the reasons which made you do what you did. It wasn’t your fault” (Okada 136). This personal apology directed at Ichiro is significant as it allows him to realize that his preconceptions of people are not always proved by reality; by acknowledging that expectations and reality may be different, Ichiro’s hope for harmonious coexistence in post-war America is greatened, as “there was someone who cared… who understood the suffering of the small and the weak… even the seemingly treasonous, and offered a way back into the great compassionate stream of life that is America” (Okada 137).

Through Mr. Carrick’s “accretion of positive experiences” (McDonald 25), Ichiro is able to visualize how American society may accept the “seemingly traitorous” (Okada 137), suggesting that Ichiro now does not regard himself as treasonous, but just portrayed as so by the American public, contrasting with earlier on in the novel where Ichiro tells himself “There is no retribution for one who is guilty of treason, and that is what I am guilty of” (Okada 76). This change in behaviour and thinking highlight how by “learning from the example of men like Mr. Carrick” (Kim 74) Ichiro learns that not everyone in society is his enemy and that he now has the ability to envision harmony between different communities in America in the future. Mr.

Carrick also nurtures the restoration of Ichiro's distinct American identity; through Mr. Carrick's nurturing which serves as an antidote to ease the impairment done to Ichiro, Ichiro assimilates and finds his own version of "America" through inherited cultural influences from the characters he interacts with throughout the novel, readying himself to forgo his historical pain and offset any discrimination or prejudices that he faces in the future.

The ending of the novel illustrates Ichiro as a more mature and grown person through his acts of reconciliation. In the ending scene, Freddie, a fellow *No-No* boy and Bull fight outside the Club Oriental, ending in Freddie's death when trying to escape. A "psychologically exhausted and physically hurt" (Cheung and Peterson 205) Bull learns about Freddie's death and responds by weeping "not like a man in grief or a soldier in pain, but like a baby in loud, gasping beseeching howls" (Okada 221). Through this scene, Ichiro's changed psyche is displayed to the reader; considering that Bull is one of the *Yes-Yes Nisei* that harass Ichiro and his companions throughout the novel, Ichiro "initiates the healing he so desperately sought throughout the novel" (Yogi, 1996, 74) by attempting to form a connection with now-broken Bull in the fragmented *Nisei* community where Ichiro was subject to ridicule and humiliation. Ichiro's ability to look past indiscretions and injustices performed by the *Nisei* community is significant as he "put a hand on Bull's shoulder, sharing the empty sorrow in the hulking body, feeling the terrible loneliness of the distressed walls… he gave the shoulder a tender squeeze" (Okada 221). Through his interactions with key characters in the novel such as Emi and Mr. Carrick where he was emotionally understood by the two figures, Ichiro is in turn now able to utilize his newfound sympathetic, maternal understanding to address Bull. Ichiro's "tender squeeze" of

Bull's shoulder signifies that Ichiro has been able to transcend the barriers put in place by the *No-No* and *Yes-Yes* boys to force a dichotomy between the Japanese-American community and sees Bull as "an infant crying in the darkness" (Okada 221), in which Ichiro "shares the sorrow and terrible loneliness of [the] distressed man" (McDonald 26). An infant is an image that connotes to ideas of innocence and receptiveness, which in this case may reflect Bull's changing attitude due to Ichiro's positive influence and Bull's inclination to adopt a milder view regarding the dichotomy between *No-No* and *Yes-Yes* boys.

From this ordeal, Ichiro appears as a matured and grown person through his efforts to find his particular identity. After finding solace in sympathizing with and forgiving Bull, a distinctly patriotic Japanese-American who "had devoted much energy to terrorizing him" (Kim 75), Ichiro is able to see the light at the end of the tunnel - a "glimmer of hope" (Okada 221) that he has found within the fragmented world that Japanese-American *No-No* and *Yes-Yes Nisei* coexist in. By forgoing his painful historical past, Ichiro hopes that in the future, he may reconcile his disposition and forgive America as a whole for the government's mistake, as well as forgive and understand why he decided to reject the draft, therefore being able to establish his own, unique identity in post-war America as a Japanese-American *Nisei*.

Conclusion

In *No-No Boy*, Okada's depiction of the protagonist Ichiro's journey of finding his identity in post-war America highlights his unique process of assimilation in the face of rejection from both Japanese and Western influences. Since complete assimilation to one side of the spectrum was not tangible, Ichiro needed to forge his path despite the barriers present throughout his journey. For Ichiro, his contentious relationship with his mother serves as an impediment to his total adoption of Japanese nationalist views; although Japanese familial traits instructed for an obedient son, Mrs. Yamada's death is emblematic to Ichiro's assimilation as it connotes how the Japanese loyalist is not sustainable in the long run. Furthermore, Kenji Kanno, a *Yes-Yes Nisei* serves as a contrast to Ichiro's poor impression of *Nisei* in general due to their poor treatment by becoming a close friend to him. However, continual discrimination and ostracism by the *Nisei* community deny Ichiro the chance to fully assimilate to Western-American culture. Characters such as Emi and Mr. Carrick are pivotal in Ichiro's poignant journey of self-construction as they allow Ichiro to become sympathetic and forgiving to others. They are symbolic of the antidote to Ichiro's impairment of character, and hence allow him to forswear his past and find his own internal America through cultural influences.

In the setting where *No-No Boy* was initially published, the novel was received negatively by the community due to their indifference to the moral issues surrounding *No-No* boys, inhibiting the reader's moral response induced by reading the novel. This led to a muted response to the novel despite multi-faceted dilemmas its protagonist faced – the compounded misfortune of being discriminated both by the Americans just because of their appearance and Japanese *Nisei* community which ostracized the *No-No* boys, in addition to the pressures that Japanese internment and

American assimilationist pressures brought onto the Japanese-Americans at the time. However, read again a few decades later, *No-No Boy* allows the reader to experience the pain of the Japanese-Americans and the identity crisis that many of them underwent, as readers often struggled to associate themselves with pain and negative sentiments. In light of this, the novel hence became an icon representing the Japanese-Americans' continued suffering from racial injustices.

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