



# A PLACE IN THE PATTERN OF AMERICA: JOHN OKADA'S *NO-NO BOY* AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN BILDUNGSROMAN

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## 'NO-NO BOYS' AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN BILDUNGSROMAN

Written in the aftermath of World War II, John Okada's *No-No Boy* is a pioneering example of the Asian American Bildungsroman. Published in 1957, *No-No Boy* was controversial from its initial reception, received little recognition, and was mostly shunned by Japanese American readership until Okada's sudden death in 1971. *No-No Boy* was posthumously rediscovered by pioneer Asian American authors Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan in their groundbreaking collection *Aieeeee: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974). Okada's *No-No Boy* is now recognized as a hallmark piece of literature illustrating the racial, cultural, and political struggle of Asian Americans in the aftermath of war.

*No-No Boy* is largely credited as one of the earliest examples of the Bildungsroman model used in Asian American literary texts. The Bildungsroman model, captured by Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World*, "represents the fusion of individuation and socialization" as "one's formation as an individual coinciding without rifts of one's social integration" (Moretti 1987, 16). The genre's significance lies in the successful reconciliation of the "individual[s] revolting desires with society's regulating demands" (Moretti 1987, 16). In her study *Assimilating Asians*, Patricia Chu notes the adoption of the Bildungsroman model by Asian American authors as a genre used to chronicle the "contradiction of idealized Americanness; the arduous struggle between the seemingly incompatible forces (of American and Asian cultures)" which becomes "the very catalyst of the genre, the birth of modern subject/citizen, and the American cultural identity" (Chu 7). Asian American writers utilise the Bildungsroman as an axis of analysis to "advocate and challenge American democratic ideals" (Yoon 7) and



illustrate their conflict of self-identification. Thus, the Bildungsroman becomes an ideal model to depict the “socialization” of the Asian American subject whose social integration is marked by unique challenges of racial and cultural marginalization. This essay will observe the complex paradigms of Asian American “socialization” depicted in *No-No Boy* through the failed attempts of cultural assimilation made by Ichiro, Kenji, and Pa that illustrate factors of war trauma, race, and masculinity in preventing the Asian American characters’ assimilation into the heteronormative American Bildungsroman model.

Although Okada’s text is set within the historical framework of World War II, the cultural and identity politics of *No-No Boy* remain especially relevant to the contemporary hyper-politicized Asian American experience, namely the insidious scapegoating and displacement of Asians/Asian Americans amidst the current COVID-19 pandemic. *No-No Boy*’s engagement with issues of Asian American assimilation, marginalization, and emasculation eerily resonate with the current and historic lack of Asian American representation in mainstream media. In light of recent gruesome attacks against members of Asian American community, it is especially urgent during this racially divisive era to assert the Asian American subject and to prevent their historic silencing by white American hegemony. With the surge of inappropriate racially-profiling rhetoric used by former President Donald Trump to ostracize East Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic (“Kung Flu” and the “Chinavirus”), these contemporary incidents hold striking parallels to the anti-Japanese rhetoric used by US media during World War II. Analyzing *No-No Boy* is especially significant, as Okada’s vocalization of the Asian American experience actively resists the damaging stereotypes and caricatures attributed to Asian Americans, namely “Charlie Chan” and other tropes of “model minority” behavior along with nefarious “Yellow Peril” tropes that, in many media outlets, remain as sole examples of representation. As COVID-19 has ushered in an international state of emergency, this pandemic unsurprisingly parallels the divisive and chaotic circumstances of World War II, of which *No-No Boy* offers a rare glimpse into the silenced and often unacknowledged identity-struggle faced by Asians Americans. In analyzing *No-No Boy*, this essay serves as a contemporary reminder of the repeated offenses of anti-Asian racism throughout US history and their relevance to the imminent discourses on systemic racism.

*No-No Boy*’s central plot brings light to a forgotten chapter of Asian-American history during World War II. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Americans of Japanese ancestry were quickly classified as “enemy aliens” and were forced to relocate to remote internment camps per Executive Order 9066 issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Yamashita 2019, 11). Once contained in these segregated camps, first (Issei) and second (Nissei) generation Japanese Americans were issued a “loyalty questionnaire” which tested their patriotism and loyalty to the United States military and government. In the questionnaire, Japanese Americans were asked:



(Question 27) "If an individual would be willing to serve as a combat soldier, nurse, or in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps."

(Question 28) "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States . . . and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization?" (Yamashita 2019, 11)

Those who answered "No" to both questions were branded as "No-No Boys". No-No Boys had their US citizenship revoked and were sent to federal prison as enemy prisoners of war (Nagata & Cheng 2003, 267). *No-No Boy* refers to this 1943 "loyalty questionnaire," as Japanese Americans were forced to choose between loyalty to Japan or the United States. Placed within the turbulent political era of World War II, this cultural dislocation of Japanese and American identity would become the foundation of the torn ideological discourse of *No-No Boy*, as the Asian American subject questions the possibility of racial-cultural assimilation within the climate of extreme patriotism of post-war American society.

#### WAR TRAUMA AND ICHIRO'S BILDUNGSROMAN

*No-No Boy* opens with "No-No Boy" protagonist Ichiro Yamada returning home to Seattle after spending two years in federal prison. As the Bildungsroman protagonist, Ichiro's homecoming prompts a journey of self-discovery and identity formation as he questions his nationality within the ruptured, hyper-political landscape of postwar America. In the first pages of *No-No Boy*, Ichiro's alienation from American society is made clear: in addition to being punished by the US government for denying his allegiance, he is coldly rejected by his fellow Japanese Americans who, unlike him, have adhered to the paradigms of American hegemonic assimilation. This sense of alienation is jarringly portrayed in his initial encounter with Eto, a soldier discharged from his military service, who scorns Ichiro as a traitor to the nation and the wider immigrant Japanese American community:

The friendliness was gone as he said: "No-no boy, huh?" . . . He wanted to return the look of despising hatred and say simply yes, but it was too much to say. . . The hate-churned eyes with the stamp of unrelenting condemnation were his cross and he had driven the nails with his own hands.

Rotten bastard. Shit on you. (Okada 1976, 5)

Ichiro does not respond and hence does not deny being an outcast to both American society and the American-identifying Japanese community. His guilt and self-hatred prevent him from articulating his voice, symbolizing his oppression by the voice of American militaristic hegemony. Coupled with Ichiro's status as a "No-No Boy," as



he refuses to submit to such forced indoctrination, Ichiro's inability to speak magnifies his racial alienation.

In addition to Ichiro's racial marginalization, Okada underlines the significance of Ichiro's trauma as a prisoner of war. As the narrator utilizes free indirect discourse, Ichiro's unhinged sequences of stream of consciousness establishes an intimacy with the reader that reveals the multi-layered dimensions of his trauma: as recurring and repetitive forces that prevent him from moving forward. *No-No Boy's* narrative structure displays aspects of Cathy Caruth's theory of "trauma formation" (Caruth 1996): emphasized by repetition and perpetuity which highlight the subject's trauma as a constant experience throughout their lives. This is exemplified by Ichiro's conflict of self-identification as Asian American identity seems confusing because his "place" within the "pattern of America" seems uncertain:

And as his heart mercifully stacked the blocks of hope into the pattern of an America which would someday hold an unquestioned place for him, his mind said no, it was not to be, and the castle tumbled and was swallowed up by the darkness of his soul... (Okada 1976, 46).

Ichiro's questions interject into the main omniscient narrative, marked by his hopeless thoughts: "castle tumbled," "darkness of his soul," his war trauma appears to be all-consuming thus paralyzing him from moving forward. These conflicts appear in multiple occasions throughout the text, underlining the perpetuity and repetitive impact of Ichiro's war trauma on his present life. Ichiro's stream of consciousness also disrupts the linear structure of *Bildung*, illustrating the journey towards self-identification as a torturous process of forcibly imposing a "re-manifestation of the self" (Kase 2010, 37) into a society that has denied the recognition of his subjecthood. As Ichiro's motivations to answer "No-no" are unclear and overshadowed by his traumatic experience as a prisoner of war, his uncertainty highlights his turbulent psychological relationship with his racial and national identity.

There were others with reasons just as flimsy and unreal and they had all gone to prison, where the months and years softened the unthinking bitterness and let them see the truth when it was too late . . . And then Ichiro thought to himself: My reason was all the reasons put together . . . It was me, myself. (Okada 1976, 31).

Disillusioned and cast out by an unwelcoming "pattern of America," Ichiro's voice invades the omniscient narrator through free indirect discourse, evoking a sense of confession. Ichiro's confession acts as a "particular act of the production and manifestation of the subject" (Kase 2010, 37). The confession of his trauma becomes a productive act, as through this confessional process of self-identification and self-authorship, Ichiro's addresses the Japanese American's rejected existence in American society. As



Ichiro's questions the validity of an American liberalism that does not recognize his status as a subject, this process of interrogation ushers in a re-writing of national subjecthood that challenges the conventional rhetoric of US national memory. Unlike the typical Bildungsroman that is grounded in the protagonist's eventual socialization and assimilation into society, *No-No Boy* challenges this structure by revealing how the disrupting forces of war and racial trauma ultimately prevent a clear socialization. As Ji Young Yoon observes of the Asian American Bildungsroman, Ichiro's disrupted assimilation is an "interrogation of the contradiction within American ideals and its construction of Asian American subjecthood" (Yoon 2014, 12).

### KENJI AND THE EMASCULATION OF BILDUNGSROMAN IDEAL

Traumatized and disillusioned by this unforgiving "pattern of America," Ichiro finds solace in his friendship with Kenji who, unlike him, symbolizes the fallen potential of his American assimilation. In contrast to Ichiro, Kenji serves as the assimilative ideal: a "model minority" citizen, Kenji is a Japanese American war hero admired by Ichiro as the "bravest," "soft-spoken veteran . . . who had no trace of the braggart" (Okada 1976, 53). As such, Kenji is the ideal Bildungsroman protagonist. Unlike Ichiro, Kenji uses the war as an "induction of citizenship" (Kase 2010, 34), yet it is revealed that despite his valuable military service Kenji's rewards are far from heroic: with an amputated leg and morbidly disease-ridden body, he is cheaply rewarded with a free car among other menial benefits from the government. As Kase points out, "Ken's disabled and dying body operates as a critique of the direction of such Bildung/assimilation" (Kase 2010, 41). Kenji's eventual death and failure as a Bildungsroman protagonist unveils the violent system behind the "social expectation and mainstream power which produces the docile subject known as the model minority" (Kase 2010, 41); a false construct of assimilation designed to ensure a pattern of racial oppression. Thus, despite Kenji's submission to Americanization, his bodily decay, and abandonment by the US government is emblematic of the shattering Bildung narrative, thus revoking the insinuation that answering "yes-yes" would guarantee one's induction as a fully-fledged American citizen.

Furthermore, Kenji's disability manifests his "total emasculation" (Cunningham 1995, 51), as he is reduced to "only half a man" (Okada 1976, 78), revealing the effects of war and racism on Asian American masculinity. With Kenji's cane serving as "temporary support," the reduction of his leg symbolizes his overall "powerlessness and emasculation" (Cunningham 1995, 51). Within intimate relationships, seeing himself as "only half a man," Kenji feels incapable of sleeping with Emi, enlisting Ichiro to act in his stead.

'I'm only half a man, Ichiro, and when my leg starts aching, even that half is no good.'



The hot color rose to his face as he lashed out at Kenji angrily: “So you’re sending in a substitute, is that it?” (Okada 1976, 78).

Kenji’s wounded castration and Japanese-ness lead to his death and failure as a Bildungsroman protagonist, illustrating the disruptive impact of racial and national indoctrination, resulting in the castration of Asian masculinity and a loss of individual agency. In David L. Eng’s *Racial Castration*, he equates the loss of Asian masculinity in favor of Western masculinity to a loss of Asian agency and authorship (Eng 2001). Okada’s text engages with this theory through characters such as Kenji and Ichiro whose experiences in the war underline the parallels of emasculation and loss of nationhood. As Asian American theorist Patricia Chu equates the process of authoring the Bildungsroman with “fathering the nation” (Chu 2000, 62), the loss of recognition of one’s masculinity shows how Japanese Americans in *No-No Boy* are “castrated” from the Bildung of Asian American subject formation.

Ichiro’s father is described as the epitome of the emasculated Asian man. An Issei (first generation) Japanese immigrant, Pa is depicted primarily in domestic spheres (kitchen, cleaning, housework) and is effeminate, if not lacking in any traditionally masculine characteristics: “Pa, he’s just around. Still, his weakness is just as bad as Ma’s strength . . . He should have been a woman. He should have been Ma and Ma should have been Pa” (Okada 1976, 97). Depicted primarily in domestic roles of submission and service, Ichiro’s father lacks agency and is trapped by Ichiro’s dominant mother; it is only after her death that he re-assumes his masculinity. Free of the oppression and community alienation created by Ma’s dogmatic, pro-Imperial Japanese beliefs, Pa is liberated and free to re-enter Japanese American society: “The round face oozed with insuppressible excitement. It had been that way since the news of the mother’s death . . . his father had been flushed without touching a drop, drunk with the renewal of countless friendships” (Okada 1976, 162). However, while Ichiro, Kenji, and Pa imagine that reclaiming their masculinity would give them a greater sense of social agency in America, this idea is a false consciousness that instead reinforces systems of oppression.

## ABJECTION OF THE MOTHERLAND

In order for Ichiro and his father to ensure their potential socialization and reclaim their masculinity, they are required to make a choice between nationalities. For Ichiro and his father, this is at the cost of Ma’s death and her ultimate abjection from their shared masculine Bildungsroman narrative. Patricia Chu’s definition of the “abjected Asian feminine” refers to “that which is cast out in order to define the limits of the subject; that is, the abjected ‘other’ is created to help the subject define what he or she is not” (Chu 2000, 49). The exclusion of Ma from Ichiro’s narrative functions as a racial castration in the form of a removal of his “biological descent relations” (Yoon 2014, 9).



Unlike Ichiro's ambivalent national stance, Ma is depicted as the epitome of Japanese dogmatic faith:

Ma is the rock that's always hammering, pounding, pounding in her unobtrusive, determined fanatical way. (Okada 1976, 12).

She is blinded by her patriotism and is the sole character who feels pride towards Ichiro's anti-US stance:

"He has suffered, but I make no apologies for him or for myself. If he had given his life for Japan, I could not be prouder" (Okada 1976, 25).

Her blind patriotism transforms into insanity, resulting in her eventual suicide, as she refuses to admit to Japan's surrender. However, in contrast with the depiction of Kenji's death, which is sparingly described by the narrator and devoid of graphic illustrations, Ma's death scene is far more grotesque:

She was half out of the tub and half in, her hair of dirty gray and white floating up to the surface of the water like a mass of seaweed...just as his mind, long shut off from reality, had sought and found erratic release. (Okada 1976, 156).

As the awaited "release" from his internalized racial trauma, Ma's death symbolizes Ichiro's renunciation of his Japanese identity. Asian women are often represented in Asian American texts as embodiments of the "ancestral homeland" (Chu 2000, 62), and Okada deploys this motif through the character of Ma. Her death reconciles Ichiro's internal racial conflict by restoring his masculinity. Thus, Ma's removal from Ichiro's Bildungsroman narrative coincides with the removal of his Japanese cultural roots, which resonates with the genre's focus on the socialization of its subject. To become American, Ichiro is forced to subjugate a portion of his identity, and Ma's abjection emblemizes Ichiro's renunciation of his Japanese identity. Ichiro's Americanization further reflects Werner Sollors's contradicting processes of *consent* and *descent*: "the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral, definitions of American identity—between *consent* and *descent*—(is) the central drama in American culture" (Sollors 1986, 6). This conflict forces the binary choice that is essential to the construction of the Asian American identity, ideology, and culture. As "descent relations represent hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements rooted in biological and cultural inheritance" (Sollors 1986, 6), Ichiro's denial of his mother's influence in his ascent to assimilation shows how these binary limitations of race and nationality force him to sacrifice his *descent* relation to survive in America. This inevitable rupture highlights the tragedy of being unable to preserve both identities in favor of Americanness, a sentiment perfectly embodied by Emi, a Japanese American woman who



befriends Ichiro: “It’s because we’re American and because we’re Japanese and sometimes the two don’t mix...it wasn’t all right to be Japanese and American. You had to be one or the other” (Okada 1976, 80).

## THE INCOMPLETE ASIAN AMERICAN BILDUNGSROMAN

By using the formal structure of the Bildungsroman, Okada is able to dissect “the contradiction of this idealized Americanness” by producing a voice that contributes to “the birth of the modern subject/citizen and the American cultural identity” (Chu 2000, 7). Yet, by highlighting the multiple obstacles of Asian American national identity formation exemplified by racial and war trauma, a loss of masculinity, and abjection of one’s own cultural individuality, *No-No Boy* reveals the incompleteness of the Bildungsroman model in its ideological application to the Asian American experience and hence exposes the unstable notions of assimilation and nationality. As such, *No-No Boy* reveals the double-edged sword of Franco Morreti’s definition of ‘socialization’ by illustrating the damaging effects of rejecting American assimilation and showing the tragic cost behind one’s successful acculturation: the loss of agency and the abjection of one’s ethnic roots. *No-No Boy* unveils the violent system of American indoctrination that forcefully silences and removes the Asian American subject within the literary and cultural history of America.

Asian American racial trauma has been often overlooked and unnoticed by past and present major civil rights movements due to misleading “model minority” stereotypes of “seemingly” successful Asian American assimilation. These insidious stereotypes trace their history to anti-communist US government rhetoric of the Cold War that distinguished Asian American “allies” from the threat of communism (R.Lee 1999, 10). Yet such deceptive illusions of Asian American assimilation have only perpetuated a cultural dismissal of Asian American literature and history. To resist this systemic silencing, recognizing and revisiting forgotten histories is crucial in critically observing the broad reach of racism and eventually build solidarity among ethnic-minorities who share similar experiences. In this current racially polarizing climate of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to highlight texts like Okada’s *No-No Boy* which reveal the unseen damage of forced American indoctrination experienced presently by Asian Americans: a process of rediscovery that contributes to the diversification of the American literary canon and, ultimately, the greater representation of Asian Americans in mainstream media.



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