

# **An examination of the Asian American Identity focusing on the Japanese in the United States of America in John Okada's *No-No Boy*.**

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***ABSTRACT** - From the primitive time, Man has been moving from one place to another in search of food in the figure of nomads. The need to cater for their basic needs urged them to explore new terrains for their survival. As such, the process of Nomadism witnessed a twist throughout ages as it ultimately metamorphoses into the phenomenon of mass immigration across the global village. Countries like the United Kingdom, India, France, Italy, Mauritius the United States of American among others were not spared by the tentacles of the immigration which has an inevitable heavy bearing upon the World History. Urged by heteroglossic reasons like politics, warfare, economy, education, employment and better prospects like the others, the Japanese also found the USA as the 'land of Fortune' to secure their hazy future in their motherland. Immigration irrevocably carries the two faces of the same coin as it does not solely bring in benefits to the immigrants but is also accompanied by the harmful effects which scar a whole communal psyche.*

**Keywords – nomadism, immigration, communal psyche**

## **1, INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of the Renaissance period has opened up new avenues whereby Man has moved from the margins to become the ultimate centre of the universe. God, being not longer the Central figure who possessed a monolithic prowess over Man and Nature, was reduced to a marginal presence. As a matter of fact, the essence of human existentialism took a new turn as individualism and identity emerged as the dominant concerns Man on a plethoric domain. This need to assert and redefine the human identity attracted the keen interest of scholars, thinkers and writers in the sphere of academia irrespective of the territory. As such, identity is aptly seen and debated by Simon During as being a defining active agent “*who somebody is* in terms of a trait which might be anything from, for instance,

a physical feature of the body, a belief, a genealogy or a cultural preference”(During, p 145) Identity is an active instrument in picturing the presence of a particular person in any society based on manifold characteristics as skin colour, ethnicity, race, culture, political affiliation, religious beliefs and practices, language so on and so forth. The Japanese clan, part of the Asian community of the United States of America, inevitably had to define or rather redefine their own Japanese existence within the host country. The Japanese self has experienced hostility, conflicts, loss, resentment, suspicion and death accompanied by negative trauma which left an ineradicable scar on the Japanese Americans as social entities of the American social structure. In this line, John Okada, the Japanese American writer did not remain indifferent to the happenings of his immediate surroundings life in the USA became the fountain providing him with the raw material for his marked novel namely *No-No Boy*. Similarly to other writers, novelists, poets and critics, Okada did not write in an ‘ivory tower’ as he embarked on a literary mission to expose the issues attached to the redefinition of the Japanese identity in the USA through his well-knit narrative fabric.

## **2, HISTORY**

History has always been a concrete contributor to the formation of identity in any society. The Japanese History concerning Individualism and identity formation is very much verged upon the American soil where Americans turned out to be working towards the destruction of the personality of the “Other” also known as ‘aliens’ so as to preserve their own uniqueness in a very coveted subtle manner. The definition, acceptance and recognition of the ‘Other’ are drawn across the lines of the American notion of Individualism about which no compromise is made. America has long been esteemed to be the unique place for the pursuit of happiness, dreams, stability, and fulfilment as it is the “fresh green breast of the new world” (Gustafson Gordon, p211-216) which soon brought the immigrants of the Asian community to the harsh reality of the Americans inevitably wounding their identity. It seemed as if the American land was unveiling itself as a snake wrapping itself against the foreigners gobbling up their self. Being the “Eldorado”, the United States experienced colossal influx of immigrants forced out from their native lands by political, religious, economic, national, social and individual drives. That is, they sought better pastures in other lands. Unlike the Afro-Americans who were uprooted from their motherlands to work as slaves in an inhumanly ill-treating system, Asian Americans settled in the United States on

their own will under no pressure, which did not stop them from witnessing the harshness, hostility, cruelty, racism and prejudices of the Americans. The flood of Japanese immigrants onto the American soil resulted from the breakthrough of Hilary Conroy who discovered an American named Robert Walker Irwin who had developed a friendly relationship with Inoue Kaoru, the Japanese Foreign Minister and Masuda Takashi, the President of Mitsui Bussan, an import-export company. The sociable bond established and stabilised by the 1871 treaty signed between Hawaii and Japan after the first wave of immigration commonly called the “Issei” in the United of America in 1868 and 1869 steadied not solely a good relationship between the two nations but simultaneously the Japanese identity as Americans.

### **3, TRADE & COMMERCE**

Japanese people have proved their might in the trade sector as they progressed within the American territory where it was inevitably impartial to recognise their ancestral identity. The initial understanding and bond tying the Japanese and the Americans soon faced a turning point in History as a result of the bombing of Pearl Harbour on the seventh December 1941 “plunging the United States into war and dismantling the success of the Japanese-Americans” (Xiaoqing, p 147) This event aroused fear and panic in the Americans as they felt directly threatened by the high presence of the Japanese. The latter were condemned to suspicions, resentment and prejudices where they were not only “trapped in economic rat race”( Melandy, p 17.) but similarly to Africans and Black Americans, “suffered from the results of prejudice and intolerance”(Melandy, p 17). Antagonism was verged to such an extent that not only the Koreans behaved outrageously if associated to the Japanese lot and stressed on to be “not Japanese subjects .... [having] left their native land before it was annexed to Japan” (CDNC). As a matter of fact, contemporary readership can acknowledge that these demeaning American and Asian attitudes towards Japanese unavoidably leave a trauma on the identity issues of the victims. We cannot turn a deaf ear to the plea of Japanese Americans along with the repeated Jewish History accentuating on the beastly treatment, racial dynamics and conflicting identities. The rising suspicions towards the Japanese are justified on the national security as America fear of being stripped of its Individualism, Uniqueness, Pride, Religion and Power. Readers can instantly notice the similarity between the Jewish Diaspora and the Japanese ancestry.

## **4, IDENTITY**

The act of writing is a powerful weapon in the endeavour to recuperate losses in the Historical reconstruction of a people and in the redefinition of their established identity. Asian American writings emerged around 1940s giving us a clearer insight into the Asian American life and History. Japanese American novels like *No-No Boy* and short stories considerably help in the soaring acknowledgement of the versatile charisma of the American literary terrain. Writers like David Mura had to face the conflicting decision to preserve or degrade his own identity to be able to be a recognised author in the American mainstream. Mura asserted that “we had come to so identify ourselves with the Victors, with the rulers, that we had denied our own experienced” (“Intellectual Biography”, pg.41-42) in order to be an acknowledged writer in the authorial batch. Thus, the Japanese identity was forsaken. Adopting Bakhtin’s concept of ‘heteroglossia’, readers can not the different approaches adopted to lay emphasis on heterogeneity and multiplicity of Asian American identities and experiences.

### **4,1 HYBRIDITY**

In Okada’s *No-No Boy*, the main protagonist becomes the vivid representative of the Japanese community in America where as Ralph Ellison in his *Prologue to Invisible Man* (1947) spells out that “I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – I might even be said to possess a mind” (Ellison, p vi) accentuating on the image of the Melting Pot and The Glorious Salad Bowl which describe the USA on a purely superficial level. Okada project Ichiro, his male main protagonist in a society, which has snatched his real sense of identity and essence of existence as a Japanese American citizen. Ichiro becomes a mere nobody torn between his being a Japanese and an American stressing on the idea that his sense of belonging, individualism and distinctiveness have been lost to be never recovered. The experiences at the internment camp add to the already feeling of being in two worlds not knowing where the Japanese move to as Ichiro identifies himself to be in a limbo;

“I am not your son and I am not Japanese and I am not American” (Okada, p22)

This sentence pronounces the treatment of Japanese identity depicting them as “a goddamned, fat, grinning, spineless, nobody” (Okada, p vii) where the “identificatory process constitutive of one’s construction and position” (Gordon & Newfield, p 153) makes it unfeasible to be part of the community without the proper sense of belonging and

identification. Ichiro, thence, epitomises the Japanese broken identities. Ichiro's denigration and alienation through the relocation camps is sharply juxtaposed to the mother's identity which did not bulge as she still clings on her Japanese ancestry yet remaining "still a stranger because, in truth, she [sic] could not know what it was to be Japanese who breathed the air of America and yet had never lifted a foot from the land that was Japan" (Okada, p 11). Critically discussing the complexities of identity construction, America seems to debase the Other's identity to free herself from looming menaces in order to maintain the White Supremacy. Identification with the mainstream remains a suffocated impossible process for the marginalised.

The Japanese presence fades out in USA as the direct aftermath of the Pearl Harbour attack as stated in the Execution Order 9066 for "any or all persons may be excluded". (Executive Order 9066). The notion of 'twoness' is aptly presented through the characters portrayed as two souls, two minds, two ideologies within one body. In *Homecoming*, Carlos Bulosan expresses similar struggles as his hero returns back empty handed proving the "America has crushed his spirit" (Bulosan, p 31), a recurring phenomenon in the Japanese History and broken identity. Once the United States fails the Asians, the split identity automatically takes over the individual. Okada's writing of *No-No Boy* coincided with the Civil Rights campaign run by the African Americans enslaved by racial humiliation. The racial inequality is directly correlated to the sensitive issue of identity of the minority Asian American groups. The novel's specific treatment to the question of Japanese displaced identity helps us better understand the severe damages caused to them. The camps were transformed into exclusion areas which denigrating the Japanese. Hence, Ichiro was alienated from his environment and his self whereby "he felt like an intruder in a world to which he had no claim" (Okada, p 1). The material, financial and social losses were petty in front of the colossal loss of identity and mental ordeal. In the story, *Displacement* by David Louie, the Chow couple immigrated to a foreign land where the widow gripped in fear constantly accusing Mrs Chow of being a thief "stealing her water" (Louie, p 22). This incident highlights the stereotyped White ideologies upon the Non-Whites.

Ichiro refuses to join the US army and returns back torn in between two identities – Japanese and American. The hostility denying the Asian identity and self esteem urges him

hesitantly to continue his studies after the high voltage of American jaundiced supervision. His turbulent soul pins him down to becoming anon existing being within an American alienating set up. Hence, hybridity contributes to the dilemma between two identities that Ichiro faces throughout Okada's narrative. Once released from the guarded secluded evacuation camps, Ichiro is left with a doubtful identity. Being of a mixed identity, similarly to the colonised, it does not allow us to acknowledge one identity and reject the other one totally as one was "only Japanese because one is not born in America and raised in America and taught in America" (Okada, p 15). The assimilation process of the white American society is a narrow passage for not only the Japanese but the Asian community as a whole.

## **5, CONCLUSION**

Identity proves to very complicated to define as an alien trapped within the marginalised boundaries of an alien set up which does not offer any space for growth. The conflicting identities of immigrants claim much debates in the literary sphere.

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