

Textual analysis of
when the emperor
was divine (a special
place called home)
ess...

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



The text “ When the Emperor was Divine” is recent literature by work by Julie Otsuka providing a historical account of a Japanese American family that experienced hardships during World War II as they were sent to detention camps for three and a half years. “ The literature is written via the point of view of five family members over five chapters who reveal their incident of relocating from their home, the period they spent in internment camps and finally when they try to adjust to their prior life when the war is over” (Felice, par. 1). This paper answers Sonysrea Tate’s statement “ You can leave home, but home will never leave you” using a central character “ mother” in the novel. Tate’s statement implies “ home”-usually conceived as a dwelling, state of mind or place-usually has significant influence on an individual following either negative or positive associations. This is usually evident as a person tries to adjust to new and different situations usually forced or voluntary. The literature under discussion has several characters that leave home and yet find it to remain significant in their subsequent lives spent in the internment camp. This paper reveals why “ home” was important to the mother and reasons for its continued influence. Being the one assigned with the responsibility of taking care of the family since the father is not around, the character effectively illustrates the ideology of “ home” all though her journey of hardship and trying to fit in the society. In addition, the paper provides insight to the how the character’s idea of home illuminates the larger meaning of Julia’s work.

Julia’s work describes the plight of Japanese Americans during World War II America. The story is revealed through different points of view of the characters with the first being a caring mother who sees “ Evacuation order

19” posters hung all over town the night before they have to leave and is forced to pack and leave their home in Berkeley, California. The second chapter illustrates the plight of the Japanese Americans through the perspective of the eleven year old daughter who reveals what transpired on a train traverse to the Topaz War Relocation Center in Utah. The novel reveals that all aboard were Japanese Americans and at when nightfall arrived all shades had to be pulled down so as not to invite rock throwing. The train’s destination was the internment camp where the passengers had to be detained apparently for their own safety until the end of the war (Otsuka, p. 70). The third revelation is through an eight year old son who describes the period at the camp characterized by fenced barbed wire, small in size and very hot during the summer and very cold during winter while the last chapter describes the experiences of the father whom we soon learn had been arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigations some time back and had been sent to a different detention camp in New Mexico. He reunites with his family after about five years of forced absence. The fourth chapter is described from the evocative “ we” point of view whereby both children talk about the difficulty of trying to belong once again after the war ended. Tate’s statement is illustrated by the character “ mother” who before the family moves learns that they would not be allowed to take pets. The mother therefore goes home and even though not vividly mentioned, it is palpable that she ended the “ white dog’s” life using the twine and a shovel (Otsuka, p. 9-12) and gave away their pet cat. Leaving home for this woman was clearly emotional with the “ White dog” representing a symbol of innocence and hope being destroyed hence revealing what was happening to

thousands of Japanese Americans who were suffering following a decision made by someone else. She prepares for a journey that shattered their illusions forever by leaving their comfortable home to an unknown place whereby there is no freedom to even keep pets. The store from which the mother obtained the twine and tape on credit, the owner-Mr. Lundy-insists that she pays him later probably extrapolated from the fact that he had seen the evacuation posters and was aware of the challenges that lie ahead for the woman and her family and was offering some form of compassion and solace. Although the woman follows orders to leave home, she packs valuables that will at least provide some comfort while at the camp and spends the most time with her children reminiscing on the good times with their father as a strategy to deal with the discomfort at the camp. The woman is clearly very productive and will do anything to ensure the safety and comfort of her family just like the previous times at the place they called home.

After the war ended, the family tries to adjust to their previous life before they were detained. Before the World War II begun and got bitter, Japanese Americans just like other minorities faced discrimination in work places, school institutions and even places of worship-(Summative modifier) almost everywhere they came in contact with their superior white counterparts. For the woman character, this was the life she knew as “ home” back in California and in the process of trying to adjust their lives after the war, the woman turns down a job she is offered in a dark room of a department store citing the fact that she might accidentally reminisce who she was and offend herself- (resumptive modifier)accidentally in that her experience at the

department may be similar to those in places where she came in contact with white people and the discrimination would cause her emotional discomfort (Otsuka, p. 128-129). These results from the fact that before detention, most Japanese Americans were denied employment opportunities since they belonged to a minority group and they may offend other employees or customers. It is clear that the Japanese Americans had only known exile and racism as a part of them an event that is particularly resounding in the contemporary world citing the fact that even though the woman left home and several years past by, her notion of home never leaves her even when she comes back to it and it has experienced some form of transformation. This “home” was a state of mind that took several years for revolutionists to transform it and make the United States an equal opportunity provider to the diverse backgrounds present in the population today.

Julie’s story is infused with emotion with so many moving episodes in addition to the family remaining unnamed clearly illuminating the larger meaning of Julie’s work. First, the story implies “it is a similar story for thousands of other Japanese American families who lived in America during World War II” (Yoon, par. 7). Secondly, the story reinforces the notion that these families were robbed of their individuality and identities and becoming mere “Japs”. Furthermore, the story does not only represent the predicament of Japanese Americans but also persons from other ethnic groups who get caught up in extraordinary state of affairs beyond their control.

Julie’s work though short, describes the shock of being forced to leave ones

home, the difficulties of living in an internment camp for several years and the very slow but definite healing process once life returns to normal. The novel illustrates an intimate and detailed picture of the minority groups living in the United States most darkest and disgraceful interlude, definitely a disclosure of persons caught in the long shadow of history. The author of the novel being a Japanese American enables her to write in a captivating manner citing the first hand experience of her ancestors an occurrence that they would rather forget but at the same time exposes that what happened has become more politicized.

Works cited

Felice, Aull. Literature, Arts and Medicine Database. Literature Annotations: Otsuka, Julie “ When the Emperor was Divine”. New York, 2004. Retrieved from <http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Annotation?action=view&annid=12283> on 15/07/2013.

Otsuka, Julie. When the Emperor Was Divine: A Novel. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. Print.

Yoon, Cindy. Asian Society. When the Emperor was Divine and when Japanese Americans were Rounded Up, 2013. Retrieved from <http://asiasociety.org/arts/literature/when-emperor-was-divine-and-when-japanese-americans-were-rounded> on 15/07/2013.