

# Analysis of "do not say we have nothing" by madeleine thien

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



Do Not Say We Have Nothing is a living testament to Shostakovich's saying, "You're living here, in this country, and you must see everything as it really is. Don't create illusions. There's no other life. There can't be any. Just be thankful that you're still allowed to breathe". In this brilliant work of literature, Thien has used historical events, themes and literary devices to highlight the tragedy of 'ordinary lives shaped by extraordinary political events'. 20th century Chinese history is the mainstay around which the book revolves.

From the Chinese Civil War to the Great Leap Forward, from the Cultural revolution to the Tiananmen square protests, Do Not Say We Have Nothing helps readers explore China through a personal history in contrast to the public account. Thien is able to communicate the emotional trauma of ordinary people in 20th Century China and also elucidate on the themes of identity and transition with help of these historical events. Prevalent practices of these turbulent times such as 'self-criticisms', 'denunciations' and 'struggle sessions' depict with great aplomb the effects on the ingenious minds, who had to suppress their true selves, talent and thinking. Thus the author uses historical events to highlight the conflict in the plot and heighten the intensity of the narrative. Thien has many tricks up her sleeve when it comes to the use of literary devices in the book. The most common literary devices used are vivid imagery that helps the author emphasize the brutality of a repressive regime.

The heinous crimes against humanity committed by the Red Guards, the atrocities of the People's Army in the Tiananmen Square and the sheer

humiliation of people who voiced their opinion, are brought to life using powerful imagery and direct speech. The use of music as an extended metaphor throughout the book is essential to the theme as it represents the language and identity of the characters. Sparrow, Kai and Zhuli are forced to burn their Western scores, hide them in roofs and only practice state-mandated music, this symbolises people's loss of identity and the will to live in those times. Bach's Goldberg Variations are also used as a leit motif throughout the book. With such suppression of individuals it is impossible that silence does not permeate their lives and hence Thien cleverly personifies ' Quiet' or Qu in the text and uses it as leit motif, silence itself becomes a language among the characters. Another literary device that brings the book to life and makes readers involved is paradox.

By creating contradictions such as ' love' and heartbreak' between the families, ' complexity' and ' simplicity' of situations and feelings, Thien effectively stresses upon the personal tragedy of Mao's China. Do not Say We Have Nothing is not only ambitious in scope in terms of the historical context but also ambitious when it comes to exploring a vast expanse of themes. The most pertinent theme is that of identity which in the case of Sparrow, Kai and Zhuli is music. Due to the tough times prevailing in China the characters are not able to express their music freely, which symbolizes the main theme of loss of identity. Alongside this complexity and pain of survival is another theme which can be seen right through generations from Big Mother to Ai-Ming. Pointing out the hardships such as ' re-education' and ' re-allocation' , faced in order to survive really adds the deft strokes to the

Thien's tale. Love and duality are also critical to the story as Thien proficiently communicates how the passion between characters is such that they seem to merge together and become one part of the whole.

Duality as a theme helps in portraying the sense of split within the characters when Marie although thriving in school is troubled by the voices of her long dead father. Duality as a theme only serves to strengthen the semblance of the book to history itself, which is nothing but circular in nature. People disappear but they are never completely lost in this book, their history always resurfaces. Along the course of these narrative themes, historical events and literary devices are woven inseparably and intricately to create a piece which is a testament to the human spirit and ingenuity even in the most perilous times.