

Review 2

[History](#)



Book Review: Okada's (1976) *No-No Boy* 16 October Okada, John. 1976. *No-No Boy*. Seattle: of Washington Press. John Okada shows a different side of the World War II's effects on Asian American identity in *No-No Boy*. The novel is about, Ichiro Yamada, who is called a No-No boy, a derogatory racist word for service-age men who answered "no" to two questions from the War Department. Saying "no" twice basically means that Yamada refused to serve in the military during the war and to pledge full allegiance to the United States only, while relinquishing allegiance to the Japanese emperor and any other foreign government. As a No-No boy, Yamada was sent to internment camp for two years. The novel focuses on his return to Seattle, angrier at himself and his family, than the U. S. government, because he has yet to understand what his No-No decision means for his identity and his relationship with his family and the rest of his community. Okada has written a fresh perspective on the meaning of Asian American identity by focusing on the identity problems of a No-No boy, but its ambiguous ending may not be easy to understand for readers who want a more specific and definite closure for the protagonist's identity issues. Okada effectively shows the complexity of Asian American identity by providing a realistic portrayal of a Japanese American who has internal and family conflicts. Instead of treating the Asian American experience during World War II as either an internment issue or an American nationalism issue, Okada probes deeper into the Asian American psyche, as he narrates the struggles of Yamada, who desires to be both American and Japanese, and yet he cannot be both because of his mother's dominating influence on his life and his questions about his own identity. On the one hand, Yamada cannot answer "Yes" to the War Department's questions because he feels American and Japanese at the

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same time: “[W]e were Japanese with Japanese feelings...pride and ... thoughts because it was all right to be Japanese and feel and think all the things that Japanese do even if we lived in America” (Okada 1976, 15). In the U. S., Yamada feels that to be Japanese is acceptable because the U. S. is the land of civil rights and freedoms. Nevertheless, Yamada appreciates American values and liberties so much that he knows that he cannot live and grow up in America “ without becoming American and loving it” (Okada 1976, 16). Basically, Yamada feels torn because he knows he is American enough, yet he does not feel that he should renounce his Japanese identity. What makes his ordeal principally complex is his relationship with his mother. Yamada sees himself as an American, and yet, on the other hand, Yamada’s mother is more loyal to Japan than America, which infuriates Yamada. He somehow blames her for his decision to not serve the American army: “ I did not love [being American] enough, for you were still half my mother and I was thereby still half-Japanese and when the war came...I was not strong enough to fight you...” (Okada 1976, 16). Okada captures the significant effect that families have on Asian Americans. The formation of a “ whole” Asian American identity cannot be separated from family loyalties. Apart from internal and family issues, Okada demonstrates the realities of racial discrimination, which the World War II should have diminished because it enabled many Japanese to prove their American allegiance. Okada is not even a No-No boy, having enlisted in the war, but he has credibility as an author because he does not present a sanitized version of the effects of the war on Japanese Americans. No-No Boy shows a controversial side of the war’s lasting effects on Asian American identities and communities. Some Asian American families were strengthened because of their family

member's support for the U. S. in the war, such as Kenji's family, but Yamada's family is different because the war breaks them further apart. At the same time, racial discrimination persevered after the war. Yamada experiences racial slur from a group of blacks who called him " Jap-boy, To-ki-yo; Jap-boy, To-ki-yo" (Okada 1976, 5). He is taunted not because he is a No-No boy, but because he is Japanese. This part of the novel demonstrates the complexity of racism, wherein even those who were prior victims of it become perpetrators of racism too. In addition, Okada describes lasting racial discrimination because after the war, Japanese American war veterans could not get the same jobs or job positions as whites because they were Japanese. They were not Americans; they were foreigners to the rest of the mainstream American society. No-No Boy depicts the hardship of being American in a society where Asian Americans are not seen and treated as Americans, whatever they do and contribute to the American society. The novel, however, has an ambiguous ending, which may not be easy to understand for readers who want a more specific and definite closure of the protagonist's issues. The narrator provides a question to Yamada: " A glimmer of hope- was that it?" (Okada 250). Yamada feels some hope for his struggles, but it is not clear whether he can find it and when. In the end, Yamada pursues something, which is interpreted as his identity. The absence of a clear resolution in the novel may be misinterpreted as a further loss of identity, instead of showing hope in finding one's identity. It is an ending that might be confusing for readers who want definite solutions, not half-answered ones. Still, at least Yamada continues his search, instead of giving up altogether and submitting to either suicide or violence against others. I recommend this book to readers who want to know more about the other

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side of World War II. This novel is not about the internment camps per se, but their after-effects. For Japanese Americans, interment means that those interned have betrayed them in one way or another. Yamada is not a spy, but by not actively participating in the war, his own Japanese American people discriminate against him. Young Japanese Americans will benefit from reading *No-No Boy* because they will be better informed of the various negative effects of the war on Japanese American identity making. High school and college Asian Americans may enjoy this book because it provides a complex portrayal of the difficulties and opportunities in having bi-racial identities. The general audience will also appreciate the book for its interesting angle on a complex Asian American character in search of the meaning of identity. Work Cited Okada, John. 1976. *No-No Boy*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.