

# When the emperor was divine by julie otsuka



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In her novel, *When The Emperor Was Divine*, Julie Otsuka characterizes each family member as individually lost, in order to demonstrate how this loss of identity can redefine one's reality often for the worse. The novel portrays the story of a Japanese-American family separated and incarcerated after the outbreak of World War II.

The novel begins in 1942 and reveals the family living in Berkeley, and discloses the family's ordeals of leaving their homes, not knowing what will happen to them, and living knowing their world will always be different. Otsuka utilizes the loss of identity and fear in order to demonstrate how they can lead to the family's instability after a prolonged isolation.

Throughout the novel, Otsuka chooses to leave the main characters nameless while naming many unimportant characters. As they are taken away from their home and placed on a train to internment camps, the family is all given the same exact ID number causing each of the family member to lose and hide elements of their identity. In other words, the children explain "[they] would change [their] names to sound more like theirs[classmates].

And if the mother called out to [the children] on the street by [their] real names [they] would turn away and pretend not to know [the mother]. [They] would never be mistaken for the enemy again!" (Otsuka 114). By using this information, this shows how the use of their names can promote trouble and for this reason causes them to lose a major part of their identity. In addition, there are also many examples of Japanese Americans not having a right to their name, "[They] were just numbers to them, mere slaves to the Emperor.

[They] didn't even have names. [He] was 326. (Otsuka, 119)" This quote exemplifies Japanese Americans not having any right to their name and losing one's identity and self purpose. Being deprived of one's name is a major key in the loss of each characters identity. In relation of the authors choice of not naming the characters, Otsuka demonstrates how America viewed the Japanese people and in other words, with the right to use their names being deprived, they also lose their identifications.

Throughout the novel, Otsuka connects events to demonstrate each point of view each situation could have on the different characters. Throughout the book, loss of identity is a theme that is recurring even on a further level. Because of the ordeals in the internment camp, this causes the mother to lose herself. Soon, after the father had been taken from their home, the mother gets rid of anything revealing they were Japanese. In order to eliminate any ties to her Japanese self she had, "[L]it a bonfire in the yard and burned all of the letters from Kagoshima...the family photographs...She ripped up the flag of the rising red sun" (Otsuka 75).

After having burned all ties to her Japanese heritage, the mother has her children hide their Japanese identity in order to protect themselves by saying, " No more rice balls..... And if anyone asks, you're Chinese" (Otsuka 75). For their own protection the mother tells her children to not go by their Japanese identities thus, losing herself because her Japanese heritage is what she previously had lived by. This essential reason for hiding their identity is what had deprived the Japanese Americans during this time; Japanese Americans had to hide who they were to fit into the society the world was created around them.

The novel concludes with the father who likewise has lost his original identity with the prolonged isolation. During the time the father is separated from his family, his identity becomes majorly uncertain and loses his self purpose.

Before the father was taken from his home, his children describe him as a caring and fun-loving father who would always be there for them. The children's view of their father through their memory is shown as " Our father... was handsome and strong. He moved quickly, surely, with his head held high in the air. He liked to draw for us. He liked to sing for us.

He liked to laugh"(Otsuka, 132). Although description of the father is rare throughout the novel, we can manifest that the children's view of their father is positive and optimistic. However. After the father's detainment and is reconnected with his family, he is no longer kind and easy-going as he was before. When, the father returns from the railway station he is unrecognisable to his children, " Because the man who stood there before us was not our father. He was somebody else, a stranger who had been sent back in our father's place" (Ostuka, 132).

However, the father's change in appearance is not only one representation of the father's ordeal in the camp and his loss of identity. As the father had returned to his family there were major changes in ispersonality, he loses his identity to be a social man, the father isolates homself and chooses to become silent, By the end of the nove, we can conclude the fathers' loss of identity was represented by his change of his role in the family and indicated through the massive changes that was caused by the war.