

# [Family connections in "tropic of orange”](https://assignbuster.com/family-connections-in-tropic-of-orange/)

In Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel Tropic of Orange, while the narrative is split into seven parts, so is the opinions and the lifestyles of the seven characters who stories she dictates. Family is an idea that defines us all. Whether that is by blood, by choice, the idea of “ family” allows us to function, and without it one would wither away. What Yamashita highlights in her novel is that family can be found anywhere and often in anything. Each character, particularly those of Bobby, Buzzworm, Manzanar, Emi, and Rafaela, find a different meaning in the idea of family, or having people to rely on, and just as their lives all loosely intersect, so does their definition of togetherness. By the end of the novel, Yamashita shows that through disastrous moments, people show their true colors and overcome distance and borders in order to define their love and family.

Bobby defines the motley crew of characters as a collective. He is all of them at once, one large family, one melting pot of ethnicity, and yet still only ever worries about his own immediate world. To him, family is what he can see. It is what he can feel, what he can touch and what he can buy to keep the rest of it from going away. There are multiple times throughout the novel where he lists things. He is describing what he can see, like Rafaela and what makes her herself, her hair, what she studies, how she takes care of Sol (17). And other times he lists off the items he has bought for her (80). To him, to make a family whole, you need the basis of a stable life and he works himself to the bone in order to provide for him family because that is how he shows his love. His world of people is small because he focuses solely on caring for those people but in that small world, “ Bobby don’t forget”, couldn’t ever forget about those people because they are his responsibility (17). He would never leave his family behind. It is almost ironic because he comes from a world where his blood, his heritage and ethnicity are so undefined because he chose to make it so, yet the thing that is most important to him is caring for his blood, for his brother, and wife, child and even the possibility of a cousin who’s relation to him is never truly confirmed. There is a point where Bobby is remembering when he first met Rafaela, that it was her brother that introduced them and he states “ Bobby thought pepe was his friend. Now he’s just a brother in law” (78). For Bobby, family comes as an obligation. For the longest time in the novel, he doesn’t recognize love because for him love is keeping things whole and together and safe, but he lacks the intimacy required of family. He looks at a man who is his friend with more outward happiness because to make him his brother in law makes him his responsibility. But what makes Bobby key to the story is that he is the one who, while more often than any other character on the sideline and outside of the fray, ends up changing the most. “ That’s when he lets go. Let’s the lines slither around his wrists, past his palms, through his fingers. Let’s go. Go figure.” (268). By having him be the one who let’s go of the tropic, the borderline between so many people, he subsequently let’s go of all his preconceived notions of how his family is supposed to be and he instead goes to embrace his wife and child and embrace love, rather than a physical and object filled form of family.

Buzzworm is a character who defines his family by choice. The reader knows of no one who is particularly close to him in the novel because instead he knows a little bit about everyone and everything. The world is his family, the static and the news he hears on his Walkman, and the people he sees on the streets. His interactions with Gabriel and Emi, while the most frequent, are by choice. “ Baby sister” he calls her, Emi, from the moment they’ve been introduced (175). He takes her on as his responsibility, but unlike Bobby, he doesn’t see it as an obligation. Instead he does so as his choice. Throughout the story he refers to himself by another name, “ Buzzworm. Angel of Mercy. At your service”, one of such introductions, shows how he views his role in society (92). Where Bobby takes on the small things, the obligations close to home, Buzzworm takes on the greater good of the greater, larger world. What grounds him and humanizes him is his affection for those like Emi, his pseudo little sister. And at the same time, he shows real and unexpected tenderness to the greater world around him. “ Who was gonna do right by it [the heart in a box]. Who knew the value of a human heart?” (218). He cares about the bigger picture in a way that characters like Bobby don’t necessarily and it makes him strong. Yet when it is necessary, he has the back of his smaller family which he has chosen. Manzanar can be seen as the opposite of Buzzworm in that while Buzzworm sees the whole world, he doesn’t accept it as his own, instead choosing to just observe it. Manzanar accepts everyone and everything. He relates to it all and creates his family by choice, but it an all-inclusive way. He feels like he is one with everyone else, “ a recycler. After all he, like the other homeless in the city was a recycler of the last rung” (56). He, while not having originated from the world of the homeless, believes himself to be of them because it has become his world and he cares for it as if it were always his own. There is a moment, at the climax of the freeway scene, where he seems to command the whole world- “ And Manzanar, loathe to lose any moment, writhed with exhilaration and christened it all: the greatest jam session the world had ever known” (206). He is happy and proud to be atop the world he belongs in, directing them into beauty and greatness, but when it comes down to it, he chooses to aid his family by blood, his granddaughter. By choosing to go with a dying Emi to the hospital, he proceeds to choose his family once again, but downsizing it to the one who needs help the most. Throughout the novel, he is the character who represents everyone, who looks at the world as a whole and Yamashita writes him to almost rival Arcangel in the character of god because he embodies everyone around him, but in the end, he is just as human as the rest of them and chooses to be with his granddaughter.

Emi is the complete opposite of nearly every character in the story because for the most part as she doesn’t define herself as having family. She does her best to distance herself from anything that voices the need for commitment. She has family, but for the longest time she doesn’t recognize that and chooses to isolate herself. She states in a conversation with Gabriel at one point- “ Gabe you’re then. I’m now. For a reporter, you ought to be more now. Let’s do it now.” (41). She lives in the moment and doesn’t concentrate on the past or the future and because of that there is only a need to concentrate on herself. Where Buzzworm and Manzanar choose their own family, she chooses to focus on herself. What becomes interesting is that through them choosing their family, in this case, choosing her, she learns to let her guard down a little bit and let them in. Buzzworm in particular is the first one who she lets in because he chooses her and accepts her with hardly any thought; “ Baby sister pulled four Triple-A’s from the glove compartment. “ I’ve been saving these for you” (189). She shows her love in the small ways because in order for her to accept her newfound “ family” she has to take small steps to get there. Manzanar is another one forced upon her but for the better. She is stubborn, not wanting or too afraid to separate her world, to rock the boat and express that she maybe is like everyone else and vulnerable that she mashes her secrets together to try and mask them. “ I had sex last night… It was over the net” she states, followed quickly by “ Manzanar, he’s my grandfather” in a confession to Gabriel (180). While different, these two secrets are synonymous with each other because they both rock her world of what she considers family. Gabriel is the closest thing she has to any family but she keeps him at arms-length and Manzanar is her family who she thought had been left behind many years ago. Her having internet sex creates the possibility of losing Gabe at the same time she might get her grandfather back and those are two terrifying problems. In the end however, with Manzanar’s choice to accept her and take care of her as family does happening at the same time she is faced with the probability of never seeing Gabe again, her problems level out and she can die somewhat at peace, but still with sadness as Manzanar is back in her life again.

Rafaela is a well-balanced mix of many of the characters in the novel. While her family is definitely defined by blood, she also chooses her family on a large and small scale. In leaving Bobby, she chooses Sol as her one and only. “ And perhaps Dona Maria thought Rafaela would be lonely in that big unfinished house on that big unfinished property, but Rafaela has been too relieved to be away from her problems Bobby and kept too busy to feel lonely” (9 & 10). By leaving Bobby, she puts all her focus on raising Sol because she understood that there is more to family that just the obligations and responsibility that Bobby sees. She is more in tune with the love that is required in a family. But other than choosing Sol, on a larger scale, she is also choosing people in general, and community, as one of the reasons she left Bobby was for her want to start a union and help other immigrants like herself, but all Bobby sees and believes is that those closest to him are the ones he needs to worry about. This is why Rafaela relates to Arcangel so well. He, like her, is concerned with the bigger picture. However, for her, this becomes a struggle as well. She states near the middle of the novel, when Sol, in playfulness has run away from her- “ How far must she reach to touch her Sol?” (119). While she is literally talking about grasping her son, in another way she is also talking about grasping herself. In running away from her husband, she realizes she doesn’t quite know herself, but through the novel, she comes to ground herself through her family and realize that she needs to scale herself back and come to love Bobby again. In the end of the novel, when she is at her worst, Bobby is the one she looks for, even mistaking Gabriel, much to his dismay, for him- “ It took her a while to focus. ‘ Bobby?’ I guess I wasn’t what she had in mind” (223). He is the thing she goes back to again and again and when it comes down to the culminating moment of moving the tropic he, the one she loves but comes from such a different world, is the one she chooses to have with her- “ Rafaela pulled the silken thread around them until they were both covered in a soft blanket of space and midnight. Their proximity to everything both immediate and infinitely distant.” (254).

All of these characters in the novel define family in their own way, whether they are purposefully doing so or whether it is because someone else has chosen them. By the end of the novel, each character is defining their family in a different way than they have before, and just like Rafaela and Bobby show, wrapping themselves in the literal line of separation, they all come together in new ways and overcome their previous boundaries. Family is the one thing that often can cross any border because whether it is chosen or defined by those with which one shares blood, more often than not family brings people together. Yamashita crafts a tale of broken shards, separated by race, opinion, and space, that come together to form something new and whole and to show that society can mend and integration, of culture and of family, is all entirely possible.