MR. YAMADA AND THE COST OF A NEW MASCULINITY IN JOHN OKADA'S *NO-NO BOY*[1]

YOLANDA HERNAIZ-MARTÍNEZ
Universidad de Zaragoza
yhernaiz@unizar.es

ABSTRACT: During the Second World War and its aftermath, the U.S. government implemented racist policies that forced one hundred thousand Japanese and Japanese Americans into detention camps. A decade later, John Okada wrote *No-No Boy* (1957), about the traumatic experience of the camps and the stress of adjusting to American society in the following years. This paper aims to examine Okada's description of the internalization of racism and the effects of emasculation on male racialized migrants. The analysis explores the reinforcement and contesting of nationalistic attempts at remasculinization and the timid endeavor, in the figure of Mr. Yamada, to create a new masculinity away from the masculine and patriarchal dyad. In the context of the heteronormative conservative society of the 1950s, the Issei father finds a way out of emasculation through care and communication, which contrasts with a rejection of the maternal figure, that is sacrificed in this new masculinity.
RESUMEN: Durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial y en los años posteriores, los Estados Unidos pusieron en marcha políticas racistas que encarcelaron a cien mil japoneses y japoneses americanos en campos de detención. Una década más tarde, John Okada escribió *No-No Boy* (1957), sobre la traumática experiencia de los campos y el estrés de adaptarse a la sociedad americana en los años siguientes.

Este artículo analiza el racismo y los efectos de la emasculación en hombres migrantes y la ambivalente postura de apoyo y censura de intentos nacionalistas de masculinización. Asimismo, aborda el tímido esfuerzo, en la figura del sr. Yamada, de crear una masculinidad alejada de la díada masculinidad y patriarcado. En el contexto de la sociedad heteronormativa y conservadora de 1950, el padre Issei busca alejarse de la emasculación a través del cuidado y la comunicación, en contraste con el rechazo de la figura materna, sacrificada en esta nueva masculinidad.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order that sent 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans on the West Coast (War Relocation Authority 5), into detention camps:

> These people, labeled as a threat, were tagged and shipped en masse to various concentration camps in desolate spots, from the deserts of Utah to the swamps of Arkansas, to separate them from the rest of the population. (Manzella 118)

The author of *No-No Boy*, the novel under discussion in this study, was forced, together with his family, to pack whatever belongings they could carry before they were sent to the Puyallup Assembly Center (Abe et al. 36). The interment of families of Japanese origin lasted until the end of the war, when they were gradually allowed to leave, although where to go was an important question not every returnee was able to answer. Families had been forced to abandon their businesses and their homes in a rush four years before, and many had nowhere to go back. Racist policies implemented during the time defined and certainly conditioned the relationship of the Nikkei community with America at large.

John Okada's novel follows the transition of one of those families back home from the camps, their internalization of racism, and their struggle to assimilate and conform to America's standards. The narrative follows twenty-five-year-old Ichiro Yamada as he returns to his family in Seattle after spending the last four years away, two in camp, and two in prison. The novel begins when he steps off the bus and describes the difficulties Ichiro encounters in resuming his life and his relationship with family and friends. The narrative portrays

the trauma and stigma Ichiro carries as a consequence of having said no to the questionnaire that determined his allegiance to the United States.

No-No Boy, published in 1957 and rediscovered in the 1970s, has become a modern classic in Asian American literature, setting the basis for a tradition that flourished with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Okada's narrative is remarkable in its ability to give voice to a community that had been forced to deal with trauma in silence. Over time, his work also served as a beacon for a younger generation of authors who felt there were no Asian American artists to follow (Chin 225). Asian American literature took this novel as an early example of a canon that would vindicate the literary efforts of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who had been forced to the margins of cultural movements.

This analysis takes as a point of departure Wenxin Li's approach to the ambivalence in the interpretation of Okada's gender reversal. This scholar recognizes in the narrative "a defensive measure against racial oppression that does not explicitly challenge existing gender norms or sexual stereotypes" (124). W. Li acknowledges the work of feminist critics who "charge against *No-No Boy* alleged anti-female bias" (124), and yet finds in the construction of Mrs. Yamada a symbol for "the dehumanizing effect of racial oppression" (125). Additionally, W. Li introduces, through the work of King-Kok Cheung, the potential of Mr. Yamada in the construction of alternative masculinities.

John Okada offers a polyhedric perspective on the many consequences racism has on the self. In this study, I explore the limitations of the construction of masculine identities, the risks of emasculation, and their repercussions for the women in the novel. I contend that there is an early attempt at drawing the possibility of a sensitive masculinity in which the ethics of care are not circumscribed to the maternal. Mr. Yamada is a character that points in the direction of a caring and non-violent masculinity that, despite its struggles and the narrative's lack of closure, calls for optimism in the creation of healthier masculine identities. This endeavor, however, comes at the cost of neglecting female characters, particularly the figure of the mother, which is problematically sacrificed for the survival of the Yamada men.

THE EFFECTS OF RACISM ON MR. YAMADA

The publication of Okada's work predates the configuration of Asian American studies as an academic field, which took place between the 1960s and the 1970s. Nevertheless, the novel is regarded as an early example of a literary tradition that would take *No-No Boy* as a forerunner for some of this literature's main concerns. In relation to themes of internment, racism, and assimilation which make the novel a classic, I focus here on the consequences of coercive policies for Asian American men. Okada advances one of the community's preoccupations as he delves into the complexity of "a symbolism that depicts the emasculation and feminization of Asian American men as one of white racism's most pernicious effects" (D. Y. Kim 69). Asian American men were denied access to normative conceptions of masculinity, and in such marginalization, they became symbolically castrated.

This emasculation was perceived as what Celine Shimizu defines as 'straitjacket sexuality,' that is, the viewpoint to masculinity in which "the easy and inaccurate assessment of asexuality, effeminacy, and homosexuality" is perceived as emasculation (3). In connection to the analysis of hegemonic masculinity developed in gender studies and critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM), this perspective on emasculation translates as a double stigma, because it not only prevents Asian American men from accessing dominating models of masculinity, but in this lack of adscription, they become feminized.

It is in this problematic duality of emasculation and feminization that the impossibility of asserting a normative masculinity has not only traumatized Asian American men, but has enormously complicated gender and sexual relations, power dynamics, and family structures. The consequences of equating castration and feminization, abundantly explored in the theory of psychoanalysis, are further necrotized in their intersection with racial oppression. Consequently, queer and feminist theory have addressed the importance of sex and gender in relation to racial difference, establishing an intersectional and comprehensive understanding of racism which frames this analysis:

> Because the problems of race and gender are closely intertwined, we must approach gender issues in Chinese American literary studies from multiple fronts: recognize the historical feminization of Asian American men, address the dialectic between racial stereotypes and cultural

nationalist discourse, and dismantle obdurate codes of masculinity and femininity in both Asian and Western cultures. (Cheung, Chinese American Literature without Borders 30)

Cheung warns against approaching emasculation solely as a gender issue, as it might imply glossing over the far-reaching repercussions it has on the community. Similarly, Eng argues that "[w]e cannot isolate racial formation from gender and sexuality without reproducing the normative logic of domination that works to configure these two categories as opposed, independent discourses in the first instance" (19). As I will later explore, the polarization of discourse and the narrow focus on men's victimhood has caused some reconstructions of masculinity to mirror white abuse. The damaging effects of racism and the negotiation of emasculating mistreatment can be observed in Okada's work, as the narrative offers a nuanced description of the identity construction of different male characters.

In *No-No Boy,* the heteronormative conservative society of the 1950s establishes the expectations of a masculinity unreachable for the men of the Yamada family. The novel examines the alleged inseparable binarism of masculinity and patriarchy, depicting Asian men who are denied not only their identities but also their roles in their families and communities. In the post-war Japanese community, "Issei fathers were demoralized, regarding their ability to lead the family, and exhausted by the internment of their families and the destruction of their previous businesses and social lives" (Gribben 32). In this sense, Mr. Yamada is defined by his shortage, as he represents a generation that has been dispossessed not only of their sense of self, but of their position as head of the family, a "symbolically castrated, defeated, and impotent Japanese immigrant male, who lost everything, including his paternal authority, during World War II" (Endo 420). Thus, Mr. Yamada's character is constructed by the deficiencies perceived by other members of the family. Ichiro's frustrated expectations and his inability to understand or empathize with his father show the traumatic consequences of racism on the father-son dynamic:

"You don't understand."
"Ya, I do. I was young once."
"You are a Jap. How can you understand? No. I'm wrong. You're nothing. You don't understand a damn thing. [...] Goddamn fool, that's what you are, Pa, a goddamn fool."

> The color crept into the father's face. For a moment it looked as if he would fight back. Lips compressed and breathing hastened, he glared at his son who called him a fool. Ichiro waited and, in the tense moment, almost found himself hoping that the father would strike back with fists or words or both. The anger drained away with the color as quickly as it had appeared. […] "I'll go" said Ichiro to the man who was neither husband nor father nor Japanese nor American but a diluted mixture of all. (Okada 105)

Ichiro's disappointment in Mr. Yamada stems from the father's inability to fulfill his son's expectations. There is a contrast between the son's willingness to sympathize with other characters, such as Freddie, Eto, or even Bull, and his lack of empathy toward his own family. He is unable to recognize the effects of racism, which he suffers himself, on his father. In acting out his traumas, Ichiro demands of his father the archetypical patriarchal and authoritarian figure associated with men. After the war, Mr. Yamada is no longer Japanese, a man, or a father. What remains is more of a ghost, the shadow of what he might have been. In his son's mind, Pa is no longer "the unquestioned lawgiver, the unified symbolic order" (Xu 23), he is just a "fool" who can neither protect his son nor help his delusional wife.

This loss of what has been traditionally perceived as essential masculine traits is underscored in the novel through Mr. and Mrs. Yamada's reversal of gender roles. The leading role as understood in the patriarchal concept of the family is here assumed by the mother. She becomes, in addition, the recipient of Ichiro's bitterness and a surrogate for the anger and fury that his son is incapable of directing at white America. Instead of addressing the racist policies that have caused his traumas, Ichiro makes his mother at fault for the Japanese in him, including his decision not to fight in the war:

> She cursed me with her meanness and the hatred that you cannot see but which is always hating. It was she who opened my mouth and made my lips move to sound the words which got me two years in prison and an emptiness that is more empty and frightening than the caverns of hell. She's killed me with her meanness and hatred and I hope she's happy because I'll never know the meaning of it again. (Okada 13)

The problems associated with the main female figure in *No-No Boy* will be addressed in a later section of this study. Now, I want to emphasize the relevance of the mother as an authority in command of her son's decisions. Ichiro makes her responsible for his

imprisonment, which he explains as her influence. Among its different meanings in the narrative, this disruption of gender expectations highlights Mr. Yamada's absence from the family hierarchy.

Theories of psychoanalysis enrich the reading of the family's characterization. Ichiro's frustration can be seen as the inability of the son to identify with his father; the unsuccessful outcome of the Oedipus complex. Moreover, Mr. Yamada's numbness can be explained through Eng and Han's approach to Freud's theory of melancholia. In the psychoanalytic conceptualization of melancholia as a pathological never-ending mourning (36), they find a framework for the irresolution of the assimilation process:

> For Asian Americans and other people of color, suspended assimilation into mainstream culture may involve not only debilitating personal consequences; ultimately, it also constitutes the foundation for a type of national melancholia, a collective national haunting, with destructive effects. (38)

Eng and Han explain the severity of the consequences of such frustration, which can provoke the rejection of some identity features, forcing psychological and social isolation (38). Hence, Mrs. Yamada's suicide, and Mr. Yamada's condition of paralysis correspond with the withdrawal from life as a consequence of having their identities amputated. Eng and Han emphasize how such a process of stagnant mourning affects not only individuals, but also communities as a whole. This psychoanalytical approach to the impact of assimilative impositions through melancholia is interesting not only in its explanation of trauma, but also in its formulation of agency:

> The attention to racial melancholia as conflict rather than damage not only renders it a productive category but also removes Asian Americans from the position of solipsistic "victims" singularly responsible for their own psychic maladies. We are dissatisfied with racial discourses and clinical assessments that pathologize people of color as permanently damaged — forever injured and incapable of being "whole." (Eng and Han 61)

This vindication of racialized minorities' capacity to overcome the effects of oppression, and the description of racist mistreatment as conflict rather than damage allow individuals to assert agency within their victimhood. Such a formulation opens the door to the possibility of resisting coercion. In this sense, the next section delves into the

crossroads in Asian American studies at which Asian American men must decide their position in the negotiation of emasculative racism.

THE TIMID HOPE FOR A NEW MASCULINITY

The emasculation of male figures has become a common feature in the abuse of racial minorities, whose "men of color are forced to prove their manhood, a coded term for a hegemonic masculinity, or risk the stigmatization of being effeminized and homosexualized" (Chan 11). This reconstruction of a normative masculine identity has often implied the reproduction of abusive behavior and cruel patterns against other marginalized members of the community.

Consequently, in the 1970s two distinct positions emerged in the context of Asian American studies. The "Asian American "gender war,"" as W. Li (109) describes it, confronted nationalist and feminist perspectives on the oppression of Asian Americans and their approaches to its resistance. A well-known example of nationalist remasculinization is the seminal work of the *Aiiieeeee!* editors, whose efforts to move the Asian American literary tradition forward notwithstanding, advocated for a highly problematic attempt at resisting emasculation:

> They argue that the rehabilitation of Asian American masculinity depends on the programmatic reification of a 'pure' Asian martial tradition. Paradoxically, this reification of a strident cultural nationalism, with its doctrine of compulsory heterosexuality and cultural authenticity, mirrors at once the dominant heterosexist and racist structures through which the Asian American male is historically feminized and rendered self-hating in the first place. (Eng 21)

Asian American nationalism has endorsed a "narrowly defined concept of Asian American male identity," which is "not merely defining but prescribing who a recognizable and recognizably legitimate Asian American racial subject should ideally be: male, heterosexual, working class, American born, and English speaking" (Eng 209). According to W. Li, Asian American men have reacted to their denial to "*perform* 'masculine' roles" (Cheung, "Of Men and Men" 173), by "obsess[ing] with hegemonic masculinity" (122). Such a fixation derives not only from their impossibility to inscribe themselves within conservative understandings of masculinity, but also from their forcibly mirroring of feminine stereotypes.

Considering this, it is unsurprising that Asian American men tried to gain access to standard notions of masculinity through the oppression of those they did not want to be regarded in association. Thus, the response to this dispossession of identities tends to a remasculinization through violence and androcentrism. "This violence, whose features are nationalist, assimilationist, and masculine," (V. T. Nguyen, "The Remasculinization of Chinese America" 130), takes its toll on migrant women and other marginalized men, and implies rejecting any stereotypical feminine traits.

In contrast to this nationalist masculinization, John Okada offers in his novel a different approach to the reconfiguration of masculinities. Mr. Yamada represents an alternative escape to emasculation which does not involve violence, but pivots toward care and communication. The novel is, in this sense, relatively progressive in its portrayal of alternative masculinities as developed in CSMM. Hanlon refers to Connell's theory of multiple masculinities, and their interconnection, as an opportunity to explore different models of masculinities while addressing the influence and effects hegemonic perceptions have on them:

> As originally formulated, all men were perceived as holding power individually and collectively over women although the existence of hierarchical relations among men produces several configurations of masculinities and results in men benefiting differentially from the gender order related to their class, race/ethnic, religious, sexual, and other statuses (Connell 1995). (Hanlon 7)

In the last chapters of the novel, Mr. Yamada appears to free himself from the numbness provoked by racism once his wife commits suicide. No longer forced to remain loyal to Ma's extreme nationalism, Mr. Yamada seems to find a way of survival, establishing new ways of communication with his tortured son. "Fatherhood cannot be understood separate from masculinity: to study fathers is to study masculinity" (Hunter et al. 2), and it is in this connection between fatherhood and masculinity that Mr. Yamada regains agency. Even if Ichiro denies the possibility of reconciliation, there is a noticeable change in the father's stamina after Mrs. Yamada's death. The novelty of the approach is that Mr. Yamada chooses to reestablish his connection with Ichiro not by imposing his authority as head of the family, but as caregiver of a traumatized son. Thus, it is within the

scarce positive notes of the narrative that the ending holds some hope for the damaged father-son relationship:

> The old man piled the packages neatly on the table and admired them. "You take time, Ichiro. There is no hurry. I do not understand everything that is troubling you. I know – I feel only that it is very big. You give it time. It will work out. After a while, maybe, you go to work or go to school if you wish. It can be done. You have a bed. There is always plenty to eat. I give you money to spend. Take time, ya?"
> "Sure, Pa. I'm not worried."
> "So? Good." And his lips trembled a little and Ichiro felt that it was because the old man was finally saying what he should have long ago and knew that it was too late. (Okada 189)

Pa's efforts to reach Ichiro are an endeavor to take back the rains as a doubtful head of a diminished family. Instead of imposing his patriarchal privileges, Mr. Yamada finds a way of getting closer to his son with a sensitive strategy based on care. Such an approach resembles a moral philosophy later developed by Carol Gilligan, under the assumption that Mr. Yamada appears to take responsibility for his family in the "need for response that arises from the recognition that others are counting on you and that you are in a position to help" (Gilligan 54). Okada's depiction of the father's narrative evolution timidly foresees the relevance of an ethical paradigm that underscores "the importance of care and attention given to others, in particular to those whose lives and wellbeing depend on particularized, continual, and daily attention: ordinary vulnerable others" (Laugier 219).

The last part of the novel gives an example of one of the main features of care ethics, which focuses "on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility" (Held 10). In this way, a new kind of masculinity appears to timidly take form by the end of the novel, with Ichiro's father proving a new model away both from the emasculated man and the patriarchal tyrant. This point of view goes in line with what different CSMM scholars have defined as caring masculinities, an attempt to "integrate values and practices of care and interdependence, traditionally though not unescapably associated with women, into masculine identities" (Elliott 243).

The execution of this alternative masculinity is, therefore, not an emasculation of men, as conservative visions of masculinity try to enforce, but "[a] gender equality intervention" (Hanlon 209), in which the assumption of caring practices by men is an opportunity to

vindicate the complexity of relationships based on affection and responsibility. Concomitantly, it should also be an opportunity to acknowledge the load historically carried by women:

> Caring is a complex web of different forms of labour deployed in emotional relationships of varying significance and imbuing a sense of belonging and identity. Caring practices are organised through moral obligations placed on carers and the expectations of recipients. Caring is political in that it involves decision-making power and control as well as economic because, although caring may be based on compulsory altruism and go unpaid, it has direct and opportunity costs for carers and recipients and because of its economic contribution to society. (Hanlon 41)

Such reconceptualization of masculinity attending power relations has been at the center of queer theory, in advocacy for a "politics of bottomhood that opposes racism and heteronormativity without scapegoating femininity" (T. H. Nguyen 14). Hence, "an alternative paradigm that recognizes femininity, vulnerability, and other negatively coded aspects of the bottom position" (T. H. Nguyen 14) is necessary as "a way of experiencing power while refusing to be its agent" (Rivera 86).

In this sense, Mr. Yamada represents the possibility of the formation of what Celine Shimizu describes as an 'ethical manhood.' Following Levinas' theory, this construction of masculinity "attends to how the self holds the potentiality of becoming aware of one's position in a network of power relations and of acting responsibly in wielding and enduring power" (Shimizu 9). This approach to masculinity considers

> [S]trength and vulnerability by men in intimate relations with others as a crucial expression of responsibility—in acknowledging one's ability to oppress and at the same time experience subjugation, as well as generate pleasure and good feeling. (Shimizu 5)

In a progressive attempt at shaping an alternative masculinity, Mr. Yamada finds a new identity in his care for his son, opening the door to a healthier understanding of the father-son relationship. The engagement with this caring masculinity in the case of Asian American men is worth noticing because in their emasculation, acquiring alleged feminine characteristics was not the most obvious solution to their already feminization. Cheung acknowledges such an effort, in that

> […] it takes even greater courage to defy the Euramerican norms and to refuse to be held hostage to them. Asian Americans can resist one-way adaptation and turn racial stereotypes into sources of inspiration by demonstrating that what the dominant culture perceives as "feminine" may in fact be a transgressive expression of masculinity. (Cheung, "Of Men and Men" 191)

The reasons that motivate such a shift toward caring are further explored by scholar Daniel Y. Kim. In his analysis, Kim offers a different interpretation of Okada's motivation, reading it as an effort for acceptance. From this point of view, caring masculinity is described in relation to an idea of nationhood based on an American maternal sensibility:

> While *No-No Boy* celebrates a maternal sensibility it defines as American, the novel also implies that it is certain *men* who can most effectively embody this sensibility. As such, the novel's valorization of the feminine works to reinstate a traditional gender hierarchy: it makes exemplary a Japanese American masculine subjectivity that is able to appropriate the maternal power of sentimentalism. (72)

In this approach, Mr. Yamada's attempt at taking care of his son is not explained as an autonomous choice of a new kind of masculinity, but an alternative kind of assimilation to an idea of America as a "nurturing homemaker, whose role is to be kind, patient, and forgiving" (D. Y. Kim 74). Thus, Mr. Yamada's masculinity can also be read as an early example of a stereotype that would acquire predominant status in the following years, that of the model minority:

> The model minority image of Asian Americans is also used to minimize the effects of racism and to blame other racial minority and immigrant groups for their location with the economic hierarchy. In this sense, Asian-American masculinity is about being a good family man who provides for his family and does not ask for government economic assistance. (Chua and Fujino 394)

In Mr. Yamada's awakening, Okada depicts some hope not only for the men of the Yamada family but for the broken Japanese community. In the construction of this character, the author offers an alternative to emasculation by embracing the stereotypical assumptions of feminization. However, the connection of race and

gender which frames this study demands ambivalence in the recognition of such masculinity.

THE PROBLEMATICS OF THE OTHERED MOTHER

The attempt at a caring masculinity as portrayed by Mr. Yamada is an opportunity for a way out of paralyzing emasculation without reinforcing violent stereotypes. In all, however, the realization of such shift toward a more progressive masculinity is conflicted. Okada's description of a sensitive masculinity might be regarded as insufficient in that it is not accompanied by an empowerment of female figures. In observing both Mr. and Mrs. Yamada, it is possible to see the limits to the optimism in the unchanging power relations between men and women in *No-No Boy*'s narrative.

The novel allows us to see how Connell's multiple masculinities are all interconnected, with caring masculinities "engaged in simultaneous rejection and uptake of hegemonic masculinity, rather than simply a wholesale uptake of a caring masculinity" (Hunter et al. 4). These authors refer to Rochlen et al.'s research (2008) to show the negotiation of balance between "caring and traditional masculinities" (4), acknowledging that "[t]he recognition of a good father as one who is involved and nurturing does not mean that the provider father is no longer seen as good, or no longer occupies a hegemonic position" (3).

Caring practices are prone to extra praise when done by men (Elliott 254), but such engagement in care work does not constitute the only trait of this model of masculinity. For this reason, authors of CSMM and feminist studies point to the analysis of power dynamics to understand any model of masculinity. Because "[g]ender embodies relations of power" (Connell in Chua and Fujino 392), alternative masculinities must be considered in relation to women. Gender "functions to create and maintain unequal power relations between people of different biological sexes and results in the domination and exploitation of women as a group" (Chua and Fujino 392). When studying attempts at alternative masculinities, they must be questioned in regard to their reinforcement or subversion of patterns of abuse:

> [W]ho has the cultural capital to rework norms of masculinity and fatherhood, and what specific contexts render this intelligible. Further, it is important that any theorisations of fathering pay close attention to how mothering is concurrently understood. As the concept of

hegemonic masculinity would suggest, masculine hegemonies are primarily founded on the disavowed feminine other. Thinking through purported shifts in masculinity and fathering thus requires us to focus concurrently on what such shifts mean in the context of gendered divisions in carework, so as not to lose sight of whether or not changes in masculinity are merely cosmetic, or whether they actually contribute to shifting gender norms. (Hunter et al. 6-7)

Mr. Yamada's remasculinization through care goes beyond the "merely cosmetic," and suggests a progressive shift toward a different model. Nonetheless, his advancement does not involve the vindication of female characters in the novel. Thus, if "the humanization of men is intricately intertwined with the empowerment of women" (Messner in Elliott 247), praising Mr. Yamada's new masculinity could be premature. For this reason, to perceive the limitations of the father's new masculinity, it is necessary to pay attention to the role of the mother. Even if Mr. Yamada does not exert violence against his wife, the narrative implies the literal and metaphorical disappearance of Mrs. Yamada as a scapegoat for the development of her husband, and the potential healing of her son:

In John Okada's *No-No Boy,* […] the identities of the characters as males are inextricably tied to their status as Asians in American society. Okada's women, on the other hand, are stick figures. […] The women in Okada's novel are appendages of the male characters around whom the book revolves. (E. H. Kim 197)

In the narrative, Mrs. Yamada's character represents the blind alley of those who choose the opposite path to assimilation. Obsessed with the idea of a triumphant Japan, Ma has no future other than madness. Unable to live in a reality that holds no room for people like her, she commits suicide, a problematic idea of liberation for both herself and her son Ichiro. Mrs. Yamada's derangement and ultimate death symbolize "Ichiro's renunciation of his Japanese identity" (P. Kim 7), the only way for the son to still have a future in America. "Ichiro redefines his mother's connection with him in terms of his acceptance of racial pathologization, necessary for American manhood to define itself" (Gribben 42). In other words, Ma's alienation is used as an instrument to illustrate Ichiro's trauma and Pa's sensitivity, and not as a means to represent specific forms of racism against women.

Okada's portrayal of the mother provides with an elaborate arc, even if the character is subordinated to the men of the story. In its

multiple readings, Mrs. Yamada can be both interpreted as a description of the traumatic effects of American assimilationist policies, and as the negligence in the portrayal of women's experiences. In this ambivalence, for some critics Mrs. Yamada's extremism is a tool for the author to describe the expansive repercussions of her suffering. Ling ("Race, Power, and Cultural Politics") expands Sumida's description of Ma as a "a complex allegory of reaction against and yet imitation of her oppressor" (224), and describes her as "a caricature of the stubborn, unassimilable 'Japanese' of racial stereotyping. Beneath her uncompromising facade, Ma is perhaps the most vulnerable character in the novel" (365).

Concomitantly, the sacrifice of the mother has also been decoded as the necessary loss for the male members of the family to survive. From this approach, Ma's radicalism and her death are an example of the impossibility of survival for those unwilling or unable to assimilate, a way of reinforcing assimilationist discourses:

> Although Okada is ahead of his time in his unflinching description of the devastation inflicted by the internment experience on his community, he is nevertheless held hostage by the ideology of assimilation that inculcates a myth about the racial and cultural inferiority of U.S. ethnic minorities. This state of being a hostage is shown in his traumatic and painful portrayal of the mother figure, Mrs. Yamada, and in his impulse to reject and degrade the maternal, whose manifestations include food practices and rituals. In so doing Okada unwittingly rejects a vital component in his ethnic identity and heritage—enjoyment specific to the Japanese American community. (Xu 21)

Xu makes a distinction between Okada's depiction of the mother-son relationship, "complicit with the object of his critique" (25), and the author's success "in challenging racial myths in his characterization of Ichiro and Kenji" (25). Xu's analysis of Ma as evidence of Okada's bias is inspiring because it shows a stark contrast in the way some male ethnic authors choose to approach men and women in their writings. Such mistreatment of the maternal, understood as a source of "Otherness," is not unique to Okada's narrative but a common device in racist policies that equate female and maternal figures with the recipient of the ethnic culture.

This view has also become popular "in the nationalist narrative that subordinates the feminine figuration of the motherland to the developmental progress of a masculine, nationalist state formation"

(Lowe 141). Consequently, together with "confusion, anguish, self-contempt, self-abjection and the loss of identification," racism is characterized by "ultimately the devastation of the maternal" (Xu 19). In other words, the rejection of the maternal becomes a solution to the assimilative demand of ethnic disavowal. Scholars such as Lisa Lowe point toward a definition of citizenship inextricably linked to manhood:

> In terms of the racialized subject, he becomes a citizen when he identifies with the paternal state and accepts the terms of this identification, by subordinating his racial difference and denying his ties with the feminized and racialized "motherland." (56)

It is only after Ma's death that Ichiro begins to understand her mother's behavior. In his mourning, he can grasp a "glimpse of a root cause for her madness in the racism of the country to which she has immigrated" (Ling, "Race, Power, and Cultural Politics" 369). Although some authors such as Yogi describe Ma's death as a moment of revelation in Ichiro's quest for wholeness (71), it might also be a symptom of the sacrificed role women and mothers play in the reassurance of masculine identities.

This ambivalence strikes as problematic in comparison with the father's ethical commitment toward his son. Care ethics has been deeply intertwined with feminism, "an ethics that gives voice and attention to humans who are undervalued precisely because they perform unnoticed" (Laugier 218). This ethical philosophy has denounced the division of private and public spheres that relegates care and women to the domestic, excluding them from the public, and "reducing them to private sentiments devoid of public moral and political import" (Laugier 219). Although Okada gives his character agency through his connection to care, in his appropriation of the private sphere there is no room left behind for women.

This process of reconstruction through the appropriation of the domestic is further investigated by David Eng, in an analogy of the domestic as private, and the domestic as national. Commenting on the *Aiiieeeee!* Group, "the editors insist on claiming the domestic sphere as their own. Hence, they link entitlement to the public sphere of the nation-state with the private prerogatives of home" (209). Even though caring was not a nationalist concern as it is in Okada's novel, there is a connection with the Group's understanding of "a public Asian American male identity [as] purchased through the emphatic possession of and control over a popularly devalued private realm, constituted here as both the feminine and the homosexual" (210). In

No-No Boy, such domination is not exerted through abuse but through erasure.

For this reason, Mr. Yamada's progressiveness notwithstanding, his masculinity is one still complicit with "patriarchal prejudices and its further marginalization of women" (Ling, "Identity Crisis and Gender Politics" 313). In this sense, "[m]en who are complicit in the hierarchical gender order can benefit from the subordination of women without having to embody hegemonic masculine ideals themselves" (Connell in Elliott 245). Such complicity distances Mr. Yamada's model of masculinity from the theory of the ethics of care as developed by feminist studies.

From a different perspective, some scholars have found similarities in the comparison of the ethics of care and the Confucian philosophy. Chenyang Li takes into account the Confucian concept of *Jen* — "benevolence, love, altruism, tenderness, charity, compassion, human-heartedness, humaneness" (72)—to find a correlation with care ethics. Li argues that "in Confucian philosophy, to be a person of Jen one must care for others" (74). Despite the connection between Jen and care, Confucianism has been known for its oppressive views on women, which contrasts with the feminist position usually adopted when analyzing the ethics of care. While Li argues that "it is possible for a person to hold a philosophy which is caring in nature and at the same time excludes women from its application" (85), scholar Lijun Yuan "challenge[s] the idea that Confucian ethics can ever be acceptable to contemporary feminists, despite its similarity to the ethics of care" (108). Yuan argues that "[c]are ethics advocates an alternative moral approach" (109) that cannot be compared with a philosophy that regards women as inferior.

In his treatment of men and women in the novel, Okada proves to be closer to the Confucian ethics of a "male-dominated society" in which "Jen is primarily a male or manly characteristic" (C. Li 85), rather than to the feminist perspective of the ethics of care. Thus, whether Okada constructs Mr. Yamada's shift toward affection and sensitivity as an alternative to violent remasculinization or as an assimilationist strategy into "maternalistic America" (D. Y. Kim 80), he does so by reinforcing hegemonic abuse of women. In all, Mr. Yamada's tenuous remasculinization through affection, Ichiro's attempt at healing and reconciliation, and the possibility of an assimilationist process, all come as a result of rejecting the mother.

CONCLUSION

The traumatic navigation of the anxieties provoked by the hostile attitudes of the U.S. during the Second World War was not an isolated incident but a consistent oppression on the part of the United States system toward racialized minorities. The consequences of such abusiveness continue to resonate in the lives of those who suffer it and affect and damage the construction of identities and familial relations in pursuit of a hegemonic standard that was never achievable. In resisting such persecution, Japanese Americans during the 1940s struggled to reintroduce themselves into American society at the same time as they negotiated their identities.

In this study, I have explored the way Okada manages, in Mr. Yamada's character, to escape the "nostalgia for a patriarchal order within a social and familial network" (Chan 126), working toward a masculinity that leaves behind patriarchal privileges and focuses on caring and communication within the family. It has been discussed whether this attempt at a new masculinity comes as a spontaneous alternative that Mr. Yamada finds in trying to escape the paralytic effects of assimilation, or if it is in fact another way this character finds of subscribing to an image of a maternal America. I have also delved into the problematics of assuming ethical care while neglecting women, linking men's attempts at familial responsibility to Confucian ethics. If Okada overcomes the connection between caring and feminization and gives an early attempt toward responsible masculinity engaged in the ethics of care, he does so at the expense of sacrificing women. His son's evasive response proves the depth of the damage inflicted by racism and the long path toward healing.

In the novels of the following years, masculine nationalism emerges as a defiance of systemic emasculation, an ambivalent opposition to assimilation that helped Asian American men reconstruct their identities and traditional patriarchal hierarchies. Paradoxically, this remasculinization mirrors white hegemonic patriarchy in its mistreatment of racialized women. In this way, ethnic male authors have vindicated their male characters but depicted "the feminine and the maternal as obstructions to both masculine development and the incorporation of the immigrant into American national identity" (V. T. Nguyen, *Race & Resistance* 94).

Okada's work offers an alternative approach to remasculinization that does not depend on violence. In this sense, the novel stands as a lost opportunity for the nationalist branch of Asian

American studies to learn and be inspired by a masculinity that does not replicate hegemonic expectations. The editors of *Aiiieeeee!,* who reviewed the novel positively, did not find in it a model to escape emasculation.

Unfortunately, *No-No Boy'*s portrayal of masculinities is not exempt from reinforcing oppressive gender dynamics. The neglect of female characters is noticeable in the function of Mrs. Yamada as a symbol of the necessary sacrifice of motherhood in the Americanization of the male members of the family. In this sense, Ichiro's and Pa's hope for reconciliation, with themselves and with one another, comes at the cost of the mother.

WORKS CITED

ABE, Frank, et al., editors. *John Okada: The Life and Rediscovered Work of the Author of No-No Boy.* University of Washington Press, 2018.

CHAN, Jachinson. *Chinese American Masculinities. From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee.* Routledge, 2001.

CHEUNG, King-Kok. *Chinese American Literature without Borders.* Palgrave McMillan, 2016.

---. "Of Men and Men. Reconstructing Chinese American Masculinity." *Other Sisterhoods. Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*, edited by Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, University of Illinois Press, 1998, pp. 173–99.

CHIN, Frank. "Afterword." *No-No Boy*, University of Washington Press, 2014, pp. 223–32.

CHUA, Peter, and Dune C. Fujino. "Negotiating New Asian-American Masculinities: Attitudes and Gender Expectations." *The Journal of Men's Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, June 1999, pp. 391–413, https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.0703.391

ELLIOTT, Karla. "Caring Masculinities: Theorizing an Emerging Concept." *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 19, no. 3, Aug. 2016, pp. 240–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15576203.

ENDO, Rachel. "Reading Civil Disobedience, Disaffection, and Racialized Trauma in John Okada's No-No Boy: Lessons Learned 75 Years After

Executive Order 9066." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 49, no. 4, Dec. 2018, pp. 413–29, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-017-9328-4.

ENG, David L. *Racial Castration*. Duke University Press, 2001.

ENG, David l., and Shinhee Han. *Racial Melancholia, Racial Castration*. Duke University Press, 2019.

GILLIGAN, Carol. *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press, 2003.

GRIBBEN, Bryn. "The Mother That Won't Reflect Back: Situating Psychoanalysis and the Japanese Mother in 'No-No Boy.'" *MELUS*, vol. Vol. 8, no. No. 2, 2003, pp. 31–46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3595281.

HANLON, Niall. *Masculinities, Care and Equality. Identity and Nurture in Men's Lives*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

HELD, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care. Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

HUNTER, Sarah C., et al. "Hegemonic Masculinity versus a Caring Masculinity: Implications for Understanding Primary Caregiving Fathers." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 11, no. 3, Mar. 2017, pp. 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12307

KIM, Daniel Y. "Once More, with Feeling: Cold War Masculinity and the Sentiment of Patriotism in John Okada's 'No-No Boy.'" *Criticism*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2005, pp. 65–83, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23127303

KIM, Elaine H. *Asian American Literature. An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Temple University Press, 1982.

KIM, Phenix. "A Place in The Pattern of America: John Okada's No-No Boy and The Asian American Bildungsroman." *PopMeC Research Blog*, 2021.

LAUGIER, Sandra. "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary." *New Literary History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (SPRING 2015), 2015, pp. 217–40.

LI, Chenyang. "The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study." *Hypatia*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Winter, 1994), 1994, pp. 70–89.

LI, Wenxin. "Gender Negotiations and the Asian American Literary Imagination." *Asian American Literary Studies*, edited by Guiyou Huang, Edinburgh University Press, 2005, pp. 109–31.

LING, Jinqi. "Identity Crisis and Gender Politics: Reappropriating Asian American Masculinity." *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, edited by King-Kok Cheung, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 312–37.

---. "Race, Power, and Cultural Politics in John Okada's No-No Boy." *Source: American Literature*, vol. 67, no. 2, 1995, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2927793.

LOWE, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 1996.

MANZELLA, Abigail G. H. *Migrating Fictions: Gender, Race, and Citizenship in U.S. Internal Displacements*. Ohio State University Press, 2018.

NGUYEN, Tan Hoang. *A View from the Bottom*. Duke University Press, 2014.

NGUYEN, Viet Thanh. *Race & Resistance: Literature & Politics in Asian America*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

---. "The Remasculinization of Chinese America: Race, Violence, and the Novel." *American Literary History*, vol. 12, no. 1/2, 2000, pp. 130–57.

OKADA, John. *No-No Boy*. University of Washington Press, 2014.

RIVERA, Takeo. *Model Minority Masochism*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

SHIMIZU, Celine. *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

SUMIDA, Stephen H. "Japanese American Moral Dilemmas in John Okada's No-No Boy and Milton Murayama's AII I Asking for Is My Body." *Frontiers of Asian American Studies: Writing, Research, and Commentary*,

edited by Gail M. Nomura et al., Washington State Univ. Press, 1989, pp. 224–26.

WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY. *The Evacuated People. A Qualitative Description*. United States Department of Interior, 1946.

XU, Wenying. "Enjoyment and Ethnic Identity in No-No Boy and Obasan." *Eating Identities. Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, University of Hawaii Press, 2007, pp. 18–38, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqwpv.5.

YOGI, Stan. "'You Had to Be One or the Other': Oppositions and Reconciliation in John Okada's No-No Boy." *MELUS*, vol. Vol. 21, no. 2, 1996, pp. 63–77, https://www.jstor.org/stable/467950.

YUAN, Lijun. "Ethics of Care and Concept of Jen: A Reply to Chenyang Li." *Hypatia*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Winter, 2002), 2002, pp. 107–29.