

Heather O'Connell

Sheri Deeter

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Japanese Identity in *Red Sorghum*

Identity is the means by which one individual is distinguished from another. It is a summary of all the descriptive elements that define a single person. Without an identity, it becomes impossible to differentiate or identify specific individuals. In the modern world, there are a number of tools used to quantify identity, ranging from social security numbers to online usernames. In the world of literature, identity is something that must be constructed by the reader using the information provided by the author. This is why the author's mantra is "Show, don't tell," because it expresses the idea that an effective description allows the reader to experience the text with their five senses. Identity is a fundamental element of literature and how a story is told effectively. Mo Yan's use of Japanese identity in *Red Sorghum* is presented as a foil to the Chinese identity. This can be seen in the lack of information about the Japanese characters, the negative context in which the Japanese are depicted throughout the novel, and the derogatory language used to describe the Japanese within the story.

The Japanese characters in *Red Sorghum* lack a distinguished identity in contrast to the fully flushed out Chinese characters. This deliberate lack of identity is shown in the fact that the Japanese are never given physical descriptions, names, or backgrounds. "Two khaki-clad Japanese soldiers with fixed bayonets stood there...like clay statues, holding their rifles in front of them" (15). Although this the reader's first encounter with Japanese characters, such a small amount of information is given that it is nigh impossible to envision the Japanese characters'

personality. The absence of detail in the Japanese as the antagonists serves to highlight the vast detail given to the Chinese as the protagonists. Even characters that are not related to the main family, such as the fighters in Commander Yu's guerilla group are given brief descriptions when introduced. "Mute was one of Commander Yu's old bandit friends, a greenwood hero who had eaten fistcakes in the sorghum fields. One of his legs was shorter than the other—a prenatal injury—and he limped when he walked, but that didn't slow him down" (11). This short description provides just enough information for the reader to construct an idea about the character, which is more than can be said about any of the Japanese characters.

The Japanese are continuously associated with negative circumstances in contrast to the Chinese who are depicted in many moments of peace and happiness. The Japanese characters only ever appear in *Red Sorghum* when there is a conflict involving violence or death. Although the Chinese also have negative moments, such as the murder of the Shans, they are balanced by good moments as well, which the Japanese lack entirely (98). The Japanese association with negativity is exemplified in the "Mid-Autumn Festival Massacre," which is perhaps the most brutal of all the death and violence in the book (165). There is never a moment in which the Japanese appear in a neutral or positive light. In comparison, all of the positive events in the story are limited to the Chinese characters. Even characters that are later revealed to have committed a wrongdoing or characters that are unimportant to the progression of the story are given positive circumstances, such as Adjutant Ren, who forces Commander Yu to kill his own uncle, yet is also fortunate enough to have a beautiful woman fall in love with him (55, 53). As a foil, the negative association with the Japanese characters is a means to highlight the good surrounding the Chinese characters, even if they have undesirable moments as well.

The Japanese are written and spoken about with derogatory language in contrast to the Chinese who are referred to without preference. Throughout the novel, the Japanese are most commonly referred to as “Japs” and are rarely given a respectable title. Even during the epic “Battle of Black Water River,” the famed Japanese general that perished was referred to as “the old Jap” (77). In contrast, all of the Chinese are referred to by a number of different classifiers, not just derogatory terms, such as the description of Passion as a “bright-eyed young woman,” which is simple, but not insulting (178). Furthermore, the Japanese characters’ speech is gibberish—*Minliwala yalalimin!*—and incomprehensible to the reader, giving an added impression that the Japanese are lesser in comparison to the Chinese (16). This derogatory representation of the Japanese language serves to highlight the normalcy of the Chinese, whose speech is always clear to the reader. This contrast is especially seen in the same conversation where the Japanese gibberish is used, when Uncle Arhat pleads with clear language, “Brothers, we can talk this over,” (15). It appears that the only way to foil regular reference and writing about the Chinese is to refer to the Japanese with derogatory terms and incomprehensible language.

The Japanese identity throughout *Red Sorghum* is presented as a complete opposite to the Chinese in order to highlight the depth of detail and positivity of the Chinese identity. What is interesting about *Red Sorghum* is that the reader is able to feel the resentment toward the Japanese through Mo Yan’s description—or lack thereof—of the Japanese characters. Yan’s representation of the Japanese identity is a part of a continued negative legacy caused by the Japanese invasion of China. As such, this is a piece of Postcolonialism literature because it conveys the tale of a family’s struggle through generations as they deal with the conflicts caused by an invading force. Novels like *Red Sorghum* are important because they preserve the feelings

of individuals that experienced colonization. However, it is just as important to understand the identities and cultures of both sides of a conflict, which is why it would be interesting to compare *Red Sorghum* with a Japanese novel written about the same era. Overall, *Red Sorghum* is an important novel for the literary field of Postcolonialism because readers all over the world can be exposed to the voice of the colonized Chinese people and read from their perspective, which is an opportunity that many could not encounter otherwise.

Bibliography

Yan, Mo, and Howard Goldblatt. *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1993. Print.