

Under the Wire: How Wartime Prisoners and Their Captors Function in Literature

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Prisoner of war historical fiction introduces an overlooked facet to the theme of cultural identity in literature. Though many critics ignore this important sub-genre of literature, prisoner of war novels provide a unique lens through which cross-cultural interactions can be shown to illustrate defining aspects of humanity. In analyzing these works of literature, written by novelists who were once soldiers and prisoners of war themselves, one may analyze the importance of cultural identity and some of the implications arising from its endangerment.

Prisoner of war literature such as Pierre Boulle's The Bridge Over The River Kwai, John Okada's No-No Boy, and James Clavell's King Rat reveal a microcosm of the world and its cultural relations in the setting of a prisoner of war camp. The term microcosm is here used to describe a community that is representative of the contemporary world of the literature's time period. Those who inhabit a prisoner of war camp, prisoners and captors alike, are members of influential cultures, as it is those cultures that battle one another for global authority and power and thus provide the inmates and captors their positions. These global conflicts arise in no small part due to misunderstandings between cultures that are fundamentally disparate.

The prisoner of war setting embodies the elements of the institutional prison such as wardens, prisoners, a type of prison society that grows up in isolation from the outside world, and a social stratification of said society's members. The prisoner of war setting is unique, however, for its caging of very different cultures together under heightened, volatile circumstances. Additionally, the prisoners are not

incarcerated for crimes against their culture and society; instead, their crime is that of merely belonging to a different culture and society. Cross-cultural conflicts are the very reason that these men have been caged like criminals, and the reconciliation with or domination of other cultures are the only methods by which they can hope to survive.

The perception that prisoners of war lose their sense of humanity when faced with severe, prolonged duress is quite incorrect. Their humanity is often reconstructed as their former cultural identities are deconstructed to give way to new ones. The prisoners in the these novels choose whether to recreate their former ethical and cultural standards or to seize the opportunity to transform them altogether. But regardless of their choice, ethnocentrism on the part of their foreign captors and their fellow prisoners arises to challenge their new cultural identities.

One of the most effective examples in illustrating the conflicts between cultures in the prisoner of war setting may be derived from their different conceptions of honor. World War II literature is especially applicable for these examples, as it involved two highly honor-bound cultures that were imperial in structure, the British and the Japanese. However great discrepancies are to be found between these two cultures in how they define honor itself. These differences lead to loathing and violence primarily due to ethnocentrism in such novels as The Bridge Over the River Kwai. Boulle's novel personifies this battle in Colonel Saito and Colonel Nicholson, the ranking officers of the Japanese and the British, respectively.

Both regard the other's culture with the greatest disdain. Indeed, Saito's opening remarks to newly arriving British prisoners

begin with, “‘I hate the British.’ ... which he then inserted between every other sentence as a sort of punctuation mark” (Boulle 12). Nicholson in turn regards his captors with similar disgust: “These people, the Japanese, have only just emerged from a state of barbarism, and prematurely at that” (33). The ethnocentrism that permeates the speech and actions of each man causes the already precarious situation in the prisoner of war camp to become extremely volatile. Each man fears the culture that the other embodies so implicitly. The two are consequently thrust into a conflict of cultures, one that neither of them initiated but that each of them is determined to win.

Just as Saito’s sense of honor causes him to regard with violent suspicion any who might challenge his authority, Nicholson’s sense of honor places his men in great danger. In one such instance, the British colonel declares that the officers in his command are, by reason of their higher class, exempt from manual labor. In matching nerves with his Eastern counterpart, Nicholson puts the lives of every prisoner at risk, as Saito nearly orders them all executed en masse. In efforts to assert his nation’s cultural supremacy, Nicholson places his men at still greater risk in the construction of a bridge for their Japanese captors’ military transports. In a tragicomic series of events, he actually increases their workload and rejects their attempts at sabotage in order to demonstrate British supremacy by constructing the best bridge possible for their captors. According to Nicholson, “this bridge represented the dauntless sort of spirit which never acknowledges defeat but always has some inner resource to draw on as proof of its invincibility” (Boulle 94). The “dauntless spirit” he ascribes to his culture, and his alone, is ironically that which destroys him.

A paradoxical example of Japanese honor in light of World War II is found in John Okada’s sole published novel, No-No Boy.

The prisoner of war camp is found in a different form in this work. Rather than the other examples that will be discussed, No-No Boy involves a Japanese-American internment camp and, more precisely, its effects on its prisoners. The protagonist of the novel, a young Japanese-American named Ichiro Yamada, faces the consequences of refusing the United States draft, choosing prison instead of fighting for the country that imprisons his people. Ichiro’s mother, the formidable Mrs. Yamada, considers Ichiro to be the epitome of traditional Japanese culture. His cultural identity is thus displaced and he struggles throughout the novel to reconcile his own culture with that of its enemy and his new home, America.

Ichiro’s emasculated father, for one, realizes the futility of his family’s attempt to keep their Japanese heritage untouched by the so-called “melting pot” of American cultural assimilation. A quiet drunkard who moves about under the forceful direction of his wife, Mr. Yamada is a failed guardian of his culture’s ways. His own son considers him to be “a goddamned, fat, grinning, spineless nobody” (Okada 12). The ineffectual patriarch realizes the implications of this situation, confiding to his son, “Your mama is sick, Ichiro, and she has made you sick and I am sick because I cannot do anything for her and maybe it is I that is somehow responsible for her sickness in the first place” (37). Mrs. Yamada herself considers her son’s actions entirely irreproachable. Her first words to her newly released son are those of a proud mother, a pride Ichiro attributes to the fact that “she had made him what he was and that the thing in him which made him say no to the judge and go to prison for two years was the growth of a seed planted by the mother tree...and that everything that had been done and said was exactly as it should have been” (11). For her, America’s tradition of cultural assimilation is a threat to her cultural heritage. To combat this threat, Mrs. Yamada makes

every effort to imbue her son with Japanese values, emulating the forceful masculine teacher her husband would have been.

Ichiro's mother is responsible for placing him in a paradox of values; each ideal that is "correct" for a Japanese male contradicts itself in the current Japanese-American culture. Daniel Kim illustrates this difficulty in discussing how Ichiro might best have fulfilled the Japanese masculine ideal: "to enact the samurai role celebrated in his mother's stories would have meant fighting for the United States; but since this would have entailed combating the Japanese, it would have meant violating the nationalistic ideal his mother had held out for him. In choosing not to fight out of loyalty to his mother, Ichiro cut himself off from the possibility of embodying the very ideal of martial masculinity that she had raised him to identify with and emulate" (68). Throughout the novel, Ichiro must confront this discrepancy, a Japanese American whose race denies him the rights of an American and who cannot hope to attain the cultural identity his family tries to force upon him.

Although it is set in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, James Clavell's King Rat scarcely deals with the Japanese overseers except in passing reference. Their threatening presence is of a more implied nature akin to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Still, their existence seems almost incidental to the menace that the prisoners face among their own ranks. Indeed, the conflicts that arise in this novel occur between supposed allies, the British and the Americans. The British ideal of honor is again confronted, this time by the spirit of a defining American characteristic, capitalism.

In King Rat, there is no trace of the uncertainty that faced capitalism at the dawn of World War II. The "King" of the novel is an American who personifies the spirit of mercenary American capitalism. He is not concerned with fascism or communism or any other adversaries to capitalism. He instead

battles the very idea of honor, and of personal dignity, placing importance on "getting ahead" in the camp regardless of how it might alienate himself from others. His methods are clever but immoral by the standards that his fellow prisoners follow. The King's philosophy gains him prosperity and the dependence of others upon him, though they loathe him for it. As British prisoner Lieutenant Grey angrily declares to another prisoner, "You sold out everything. Honor—integrity—pride—all for a handout from the worst bastard in this stinkhole" (Clavell 350). To Grey, then, a man such as the King is a greater enemy and threat than their own captors. Again, the microcosm of the world that the prisoner of war camp provides is portrayed in how others perceive an American who acts out a ruthless version of that most American notion, the "American Dream."

Many historical records exist that detail the difficulties that arose from American-Anglo relations. In his extensive biography of Sir Stewart Menzies, the head of the British secret service for twenty years, Anthony Cave Brown references on numerous occasions the rifts that frequently arose between the allied nations. Even before the United States entered the war, the heads of Great Britain understood that "England would have to pay a stiff price for American support. Among the matters that Britain would have to undertake was a renunciation of imperialism and an abandonment of the empire. And that neither Churchill nor Menzies was prepared to countenance" (Brown 269). Indeed, Menzies himself frequently was at odds with the leader of the United States' Office of Strategic Services (later the CIA), William Donovan. Brown writes that, on the part of the British secret services, "there was a concerted policy [...] to limit, control, or prevent OSS in the nature of the work it could undertake within the empire and from British or British-controlled capitals" (493). Such mutual distrust is not surprisingly found in King Rat;

therefore, as members from even allied cultures come into constant conflict as their ethnocentrism dominates their behavior.

William Richardson views the camp in King Rat as a place that might allow each of the unfortunate prisoners the unique opportunity “to know his own character as it truly is, unadorned by any of the conventional masks that might have so artfully cloaked it in the world outside Changi” (204). Indeed, the introduction to the novel certainly supports this claim, as it describes the camp as “genesis, the place of beginning again” (Clavell 8). As such, Clavell’s novel provides examples of how humans, stripped of pretenses, choose to either rebuild those pretenses or rely purely on survival instinct to survive. The King’s closest friend is Peter Marlowe, a member of the British gentry. Marlowe himself is persuaded to the shrewd American’s way of thinking—he explains to the seething Lieutenant Grey that “all he did was adapt to circumstances [...] don’t tell me you’d rather be dead with your goddam virtues than alive and know you’ve had to compromise a little” (350). Although they are from the same culture, Marlowe is willing to sacrifice the morals that have been bred into him in order to survive; Grey is not. In any case, a prison society emerges that mirrors the world outside of it, with its own stratification of classes in the cases of the haves and the have-nots. The eventual downfall of the King

and the effects this has on his minions and enemies presents provoking ramifications for the viability of their chosen cultural identities.

Future research will continue to draw from twentieth-century literature concerning World War II and the Korean War. (The Korean War experience will be represented by Ha Jin’s War Trash. This novel details the cultural conflicts experienced by a captured Chinese soldier who becomes an intermediary between his fellow prisoners and his captors.)

There are two reasons for this focus. First, the events are chronologically distant enough that their impacts have received substantial attention, yet recent enough that some subtle consequences are only being discovered now. Second, these wars were waged by especially multifarious cultures that are still relevant today, such as the United States, Great Britain, China and Japan. Of special interest, therefore, will be the differences found between the East and West.

Historical background will be provided not to explain the nature of these well-known conflicts, but to depict the mistrust and misunderstandings found between these cultures—even between allies. Apart from military and cross-cultural background research and literary criticism, the sources for this discussion will be the aforementioned works of literature by Pierre Boulle, James Clavell, Ha Jin, and John Okada.

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