

AFTER DARKNESS

“After Darkness shows a bleak view of humanity devoid of hope and redemption” to what extent do you agree?

Christine Piper’s historical fiction *After Darkness*, provides a dark and bleak view of humanity, however not entirely devoid of hope. Set during the World War Two, the novel explores the wide reaching ramifications that comes along with war, particularly through the lens of Pacific Theatre. Through the crimes carried out by ‘Unit 731’ by Imperial Japan and internment of Japanese civilians at Loveday by Australia, Piper highlights that humanity is usually the first casualty of war and societal division. Even in a world with multicultural and egalitarian ideas, Piper views humans to be segregated on the basis of hatred and prejudice. However, the novel does promise some hope in the readers through depicting that ‘common humanity’ is not extinguished by any adversity or sufferings. It displays individuals who acknowledge the power of love and compassion to have ability to transform into someone who has moral fortitude and stand against injustice. Thereby, indicating that even in the darkest of times and places, people do not lose their capacity to offer understanding or comfort to others.

The war crimes committed by Imperial Japan and internment of innocent civilians by Australia serves to illustrate how countries are prepared to violate basic human rights at their own national interests. Japan’s project of “ruling over Great East Asia” is more important than any individual suffering. As a consequence, Japan strengthens its weapon arsenal by developing biological weapons. Adults and children are barbarically injected with deadly viruses, such as “bubonic plague and anthrax”, in order to test weapons. Piper further provides a much vulgar and displeasing view of humanity by mentioning the terms used for these poor victims; They were euphemistically called “logs” or “specimens”, not only this terminology was used dehumanised them, it was a convenient way to hide the truth. In Australia’s side of war, all non-white civilians were incarcerated as “enemy aliens.” These internment camps consisted of Japanese as well as civilians from other Axis nations. The ugly reaction of the “fair skinned” Australian women with Ibaraki on Murray Bridge station suggests the hostility of many Australians towards Japanese people. Her face “twisted with hatred” spats on Ibaraki’s train window, hatefully shouting “Bloody Japs.” Through such characterisation of women and daughter as narrow minded people, it physicalises the fear and paranoia that resulted in the institutionalisation of interment camps for those identified as “enemy aliens.” Ultimately, through unjust imprisonment of civilians at Loveday and barbaric experiments conducted by ‘Unit 731’, Piper shows a bleak view of humanity.

Furthermore, Piper displays a stark perspective of humanity through marginalising people who hope for peace, unity and co-existence. In Loveday internment camp, Japanese nationalists denounce their fellow “haafus” for having “tainted blood in...[them].” Older Japanese interns strike at them demanding for egalitarianism as saying, “you don’t deserve Japanese blood in you.” This dichotomy between half –bloods and pure Japanese in Loveday indicates the fact that war isolates people who solely hope for peace and unity. For instance, Johnny Chang and other half-bloods are deeply criticised for holding multiculturalistic views by Japanese traditionalists in the camp. It is to such an extent that even an innocent fellow, Stan Suzuki is “beat by iron pole” by Yamada and Mori. Even Australian people detain the half-castes, who themselves hold Australian values. Thereby, it suggests that people who hope for peace, unity and reconciliation are often isolated by men who are fueled with prejudice and hatred.

On the contrary, Piper uses the transition of Ibaraki as an example of hope and redemption. Piper portrays the Australian characters, as ingenuously open and brashly honest- it is from these strong and admirable traits that Ibaraki ultimately learns about courage and forgiveness. For instance, Johnny Chang's egalitarian beliefs displayed by his courage to speak against Japanese authority at Loveday camp, as well as his relationship with Stan affects more on his traditional beliefs, as for the first time Ibaraki opens up to someone, confessing about his private life at Tokyo. The characters in Loveday help him develop the voice he needs to speak about his past, however it Sister Bernice who provides him with the "courage and forgiveness he needed all along." Her "soft voice" that "put patients on ease" impacts on Ibaraki insightfully, he understands that "in keeping [his] silence he hadn't exercised the very thing that made. [him] human" which was the "capacity to understand one another." Bernice's letter from 1942 "opens up to [him]" like the "flowers' bloom" from the Boab tree, he learns it is love that will ultimately enable him to change, and to experience forgiveness and renewal. When he finally confronts Japanese secrecy by telling the truth as he knows it, the reader believes that he will indeed never look back. Moreover, The renewal of Ibaraki symbolises with the mallee tree, where even being burned and destroyed, an individual can grow into different shapes and forms.

Subsequently, the novel illustrates hope and redemption to be given in the form of those who speak out against injustices. This is displayed by both the protagonist- Dr. Ibaraki and other characters. Ibaraki with his inherent compassionate nature is unable to sustain the professional façade demanded of him. The images of blistered limbs, blackened faces and "grotesque, rotting flesh that shriveled and puckered to reveal bone" come to haunt him. By the time he is required to dissect the body of an infant, he cannot complete the task, precisely because his linked to infant by their common humanity. The mere refutation of a clear command by Major Kimura and the "Army Medical College" ensures the readers that humanity is not lost. Furthermore, the baseball game acts as a metaphor for inclusion. The whole camp develops a sense of unity, changing the atmosphere at the camp by lifting morale and cementing friendship. Likewise, Stan's funeral is attended by a large number of mass, indicating the mutual sadness everyone felt at his demise. As a result, Piper provides instances in the novel where hope in humanity is not peripheral rather significant.

In *After Darkness*, the implied message of confession, forgiveness and redemption is established in a retrospective narrative of Dr. Ibaraki's life. Although Piper illustrates an adverse perspective of humanity, the notion of hope and redemption for sure is not absent.

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