



HISTORICIZING THE SILENCE OF JAPANESE CANADIANS: A STUDY OF JOY KOGAWA'S *OBASAN* AND *ITSUKA*

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Abstract

This article deals with Joy Kogawa's Obasan and Itsuka. Both the novels try to talk about the history of Japanese Canadians which was silenced by the mainstream history.

Joy Kogawa, born in Vancouver in 1935, to Japanese-Canadian parents is a highly acclaimed Japanese Canadian writer. During the Second World War, she and her family were forced to move to Slocan, British Columbia, an injustice Kogawa addresses in her 1981 novel, *Obasan* and 1992 novel *Itsuka*. Kogawa has worked to educate Canadians about the history of Japanese Canadians and she was active in the fight for official governmental redress. In her novels *Obasan* and *Itsuka* (which is a sequel to *Obasan*), she historicizes the sufferings of Japanese Canadians and depicts how they were silenced as others in Canada. This paper attempts a reading of *Obasan* and *Itsuka* by locating these two novels as the history of Japanese Canadians.

Obasan, published in 1981, talks about Canada's internment, evacuation and dispersal of its citizens of Japanese descent before and after the Second World War Kogawa states that it is based on historical events and her own experiences. Kogawa seems to be associating silence as a part of the history of Japanese Canadians. In the passage that prefaces the novel Kogawa speaks about the silence of stone (Japanese Canadians). She says: "There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak." She wants the stone to burst with telling as she hears only White Sound. Thus Kogawa's fiction seems to be questioning the so called history of Japanese Canadians created by the Whites. The novel is from the perspective of Naomi Nakane, a 36 year old middle school teacher. She narrates the story through a series of

articles and official documents which her Aunt Emily brought to her. Aunt Emily has been pictured as a strong willed woman and has been contrasted with Naomi and Obasan. Naomi's childhood memory of her mother abandoning her and fleeing to Japan is a cause of emotional distress for her and in order to escape from the affliction that those memories cause, she seems to have built a wall to safeguard her from emotion and lack of maternal care. Naomi's middle aged life when compared with her childhood life seems to be unchanged and it continues to be desolate. She thinks of her childhood memories as dolorous, most of which had to be forgotten in Canada itself. It shifts between her past and the present and narrates the identity problems and oppressions faced by the Japanese Canadians there. And sometimes we can view it in the form of notes or memoirs that relocate the history.

In the beginning of the novel, Naomi recalls her visit to Granton every year with her uncle Isamu who is her father's older half-brother. Naomi always wants to know the purpose of their visit to such a place. But her uncle who lives in his own memories does not reveal the significance of that place. She also recollects her experience with her students asking about her unmarried status and the phone call that informed her about her uncle's death. Naomi also thinks about the surprised look of others regarding her oriental face. She gets nervous about the question from the natives, "Where do you come from?" that constantly reminds her of her identity as a foreigner. Even when she is born in that country she is considered as a foreigner as her mother is a "Nisei" or second generation. She has to explain that her grandparents, born in Japan, were "Issei" or first generation while the children of "Nisei" were called "Sansei" or third generation. Naomi gets irritated about the people questioning her identity as a Japanese Canadian. She then goes to her uncle's house and meets his widow who is her Obasan (aunt), Ayako.

Obasan is like a stone to her who does not speak about the past and sufferings. She can be viewed as a "silenced" woman who carries the history of Japanese Canadians. For her "She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways



and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite personal details" (16). Obasan and her house talk about their past through the photographs and the endless items that are a part of Obasan's routine. But they never try to speak their history through words. They wanted their children to be safe. Naomi says, "The memories were drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence. Everywhere I could hear the adults whispering, *Kodomo no tame*. For the sake of children . . . Calmness was maintained" (21).

When Obasan lives in the world of silence Aunt Emily who is Naomi's mother's sister lives in the world of language. In contrast to the character of Obasan, she questions the historicity of the lives of Japanese Canadians and racism that is prevailing in Canada regarding their identity. She says: "What a bunch of sheep we were. Polite. Meek. All the way up the slaughterhouse ramp. Why in a time of war with Germany and Japan would our government seize the property and homes of Canadian-born Canadians but not the homes of German-born Germans?" (38).

She fights for Nisei's identity in Canada. Her manuscript, "The Story of Nisei in Canada: A Struggle for Liberty" stresses the nativity of Nisei as the Canadians. As Naomi says in the novel, "Aunt Emily BA, MA is a word warrior." When Obasan says, "it is better to forget?" Aunt Emily says that "the past is the future." Aunt Emily tells Naomi once: "You have to remember. You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you are bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene" (49-50).

Naomi seems to be following the tradition of Obasan by silencing herself. But Aunt Emily urges her to remember her past and speak. But when Naomi thinks about her past her silence states certain things. We come to know about Stephen, Naomi's brother and Obasan's two still births. The memories of Naomi take us to the white Old man Gower who used to "carry her away" when she was four years old. It also takes us to the frustrating stories of their sufferings as a Japanese Canadian when Naomi and Stephen were in their school. We also learn about Naomi's mother who is not coming back after the war. Naomi does not know where her mother is or what happened to her.

Naomi's mother went with her mother to see her ill grandmother. It was around the time of Naomi's molestation in 1941.

Naomi talks about the life of Japanese Canadians during the war. Her Grandma and Grandpa Nakane were imprisoned at the Pool. Those who lived in Vancouver were sent to Hastings Park, a holding area. Then they were sent to labour and concentration camps. Some families found homes in "ghost towns." She says: "Time has solved few mysteries. Wars and rumours of wars, racial hatreds and fears are with us still" (78).

She reads the diary of Aunt Emily. It contains Aunt Emily's letters to her mother. It was written when her mother was in Japan. The letters tell us about the real status of Japanese Canadians during Second World War. In 1941 their sufferings began with the cancellation of business licenses and confiscation of autos. Their fishing boats were seized and the fishing licenses were suspended. By March of 1942, all people of Japanese descent were being forced to leave. Conditions in the labour camps became worse. The properties of Japanese Canadians were looted. Some families ran away. But many of the Canadian towns did not allow the Japanese to stay there. Refugee camps were opened. Naomi's Father and Grandma and Grandpa Nakane wound up in a camp. Stephen developed a limp. In one letter, Aunt Emily asks her sister whether she was pregnant when she went to Japan. On May 22, 1942, Obasan goes with Stephen and Naomi to Slokan. Thus they also had to leave their space. They meet Aunt Emily again only in 1960.

Naomi revisits the places including Slokan in 1962 with her uncle, Obasan and Aunt Emily and thinks about her past. She cannot find the traces of her history there. Naomi recollects her comfortable life with Stephen, uncle and Obasan. But she was not told any truths about their father and mother. As a child she didn't understand why they were forced to move out of Slokan. But she remembers every minute detail and understands everything as an adult and tells us the history of the minority Japanese Canadians. Some of the Japanese Canadians moved to Japan and



suffered greatly. They had no space either in Canada or in Japan. She understands that her mother and grandma were suffering in Japan. In Canada, even attending the Japanese classes was considered as a disloyalty to the country.

For her, moving into the past was sometimes moving away from the present and vice versa. She thinks: And I am tired, I suppose, because I want to get away from all this. From the past and all these papers, from the present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words. I want to break loose from the heavy identity, the evidence of rejection, the unexpressed passion, the misunderstood politeness. I am tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum, unable to shout or sing or dance, unable to scream or swear, unable to laugh, unable to breathe out loud. (183)

But still she thinks about her tiring past and reconstructs the history of oppressions.

In 1945, Obasan, Uncle, Naomi, and Stephen went to the city of Lethbridge, Alberta, and then drove to a farm in Granton. They moved their things into a one-room hut. Naomi says that she is not able to stand the hardships that Japanese Canadians suffered there. Until 1949 they were not allowed to go back to their home. Their grandpa died when they were in Granton and her father had an operation. In the school Japanese students tormented them with racist remarks. In 1951 their family moved to town. She understands that her father is dead. Aunt Emily tries for her sister's readmission to Canada. But it doesn't work out and nothing is revealed to the children. Naomi also remembers the disgusted looks of Canadians regarding Japanese Canadians when they visit their house in the town.

Naomi understands about the fate of her mother and grandma from the letters of Grandma. Grandma, in her letter written in 1945, requested to forgive her "for the burden of these words" (236). Aunt Emily wants them to know it. Nagasaki bombing has hit them and grandma Kato, her niece's daughter and her mother survived. But her mother was severely disfigured. Mother wanted her children to be spared the truth. Naomi is worried at the silence of her mother. She says: "Mother, for her part, continued her vigil of silence. She spoke with no one about her torment. She specifically requested that Stephen and I be spared the truth" (236).

Naomi understands that her mother is no more. She questions the silence of herself and her mother. She says: "Gentle mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (243). She feels her mother and tries to break their silence. She may be feeling for a tongue and language to voice her sufferings. She must have understood the importance of words where silencing is a tool of the oppressor. So in the morning, when the silently grieving Obasan looks through a box of photographs, she puts on Aunt Emily's coat and drives to the coulee as a symbol of breaking the silence as Aunt Emily has told her. The novel ends with an excerpt from a 1946 memo written by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians, arguing against the deportation of Japanese Canadians.

Obasan thus talks about the breaking of silence and the history of Japanese Canadians constructed by the Whites. The fiction talks about the facts and insists on present words and actions by concentrating on the past to construct a better future. Thus it tells the history of Japanese Canadians who were humiliated, "othered" and molested by the native Canadians during the Second World War. It seems that the "othering" is still continuing and they need to raise their voices against this oppression.

Itsuka, the second novel by Joy Kogawa, published in 1992, tells the history of Japanese Canadians through the eyes of little Naomi Nakane, whom we first see in *Obasan*. Naomi journeys from her silence to the quest for identity in this novel. *Itsuka* can be viewed as a sequel to *Obasan* and more political than it. Joy Kogawa explores the Japanese Canadian war experience in this novel. The story focuses on reaching that *itsuka* - someday - when the mistreatment of those of Japanese heritage during the Second World War would be recognized. During the war, both the United States and Canada confined Japanese-Americans in prisons and seized their properties. When the war ended, the properties of those who were confined in Canada were never returned to them. *Itsuka*



presents the story of the fight to get government compensation for the thousands of victims who were interned during the war. As a matter of fact, government agreed to grant compensation only in 1988. The novel presents a captivating historical account of the fight for redressal and carries a message of inspiration and hope.

The novel opens with Naomi Nakane waiting for the northbound Bathurst bus in the splattering rain in a Sunday afternoon during 1983. We can see Naomi thinking about herself and her identity from the beginning of the novel. Naomi thinks: “What frail creatures we are, yearning to know and desperate for what eludes us. We’re a planet of snails with our not-yet eyes, our delicate horns probing the windy currents of memory and meaning, seeking direction” (2). She hears a promise of hope in the rain.

Naomi thinks about her first meeting with Father Cedric, “the freedom loving priest,” in 1976. Aunt Emily introduced them. Aunt Emily works for the Japanese Canadian redress and is completely involved in it. Father Cedric calls Aunt Emily’s writings “a national treasure.” She is the editor of “Bridge Magazine.” According to her Bridge is a verb that means “taking you from one side to otherness.” “The Nisei News” is one of her many efforts to keep the community connected when they went through “the evacuation.” For her “the dispersed are the disappeared, unless they are connected.”

Aunt Emily, the Nisei (second generation Japanese Canadian) wants the community to organize and speak for their rights. For her the Bird Commission is a farce. It was intended to get them fair compensation for the property the government stole from them. But Naomi’s Obasan (aunt) and uncle stay silent for the sake of the children like the issei (first generation Canadians). Uncle believed that itsuka (someday), the time for laughter will come. Naomi also longed to go back to her home.

Aunt Emily wants the unheard voice of Japanese Canadians to be heard. She wants Naomi to be part of their fight. She always gets surprised at Naomi’s silence. She thinks that it is hilarious that she is named after Miss Naomi Best, “matriarch of the marginalized.” But Naomi always thinks about her “paradise lost” Vancouver days and remains silent as she is terribly wounded by the sufferings they had in their life. She lives with a fear in her heart.

When Naomi thinks about her past we can see that she lived as an “other” in Canada. The children of other households considered Naomi and her brother Stephen as disgusting Japanese kids. They did not see them as Canadians. Still some people like Mitzi’s mother wanted Mitzi and her brother to view them as Canadians. Most cities in Canada, including Lethbridge, also do not want “the Japs.” Japs from Slocan relocate to places like Granton that have got “a lot of churches, but no movie theatres.” They get civilized by the evangelists. Naomi says about the evangelists: “For these evangelists whose mandate is to rescue the perishing, there are only two categories of people: the saved and the lost. And those who come from that Godless nation of Japan are definitely the lost” (33). But many of the Japs do not know that they are eternally damned for the Whites. Their acts are considered as non biblical. They are supposed to be born again to become true Christians. When they try to adopt English names and culture, they are not considered as the English. They are always Japs for them. But Japanese Canadians do not seem to understand it.

One of the evangelists, Pastor Jim, wanted Stephen to go to the Bible school. But Stephen escaped to the University of Toronto and became a musical celebrity. But many people of Granton, due to the influence of evangelists, ended their lives in Bible school. They were afraid of the good and the bad dichotomy set by the evangelists. When the new life was given by the evangelists, some people like crazy Alex got transformed and became spiritual whereas some like Baby Anna started seeing nightmares.

In 1954 Naomi takes a Temporary Licence Teacher-Training Course in Calgary and returns the following year to teach in Granton. Naomi remembers her love for cats along with her memoirs and Hank, a White and his love for animals. She thinks about her problems with marriage and Hank’s love making. In 1964 she moves to Cecil consolidated school and continues there till 1974. Her friend Anita Jeffrey gets engaged with Hank. Anita tells Naomi about her conquest. “We’re doing what comes naturally,” she said, her large red mouth smiling happily.



“White folks marry white folks. That’s what my daddy always says” (54). Naomi gets depressed at this news. She is not able to follow the biblical sayings and the prayers uttered by her friends to console her. She runs away from them.

Naomi’s uncle Isamu Nakane dies at the age of eighty three. Crazy Alex and his mother were the only non-Japanese Canadians who attended the funeral. Naomi understands that her mother and grandma got trapped in the Nagasaki bombing when they went to Japan. Naomi’s past fills her with tears. Aunt Emily tells her the story of the segregation of Japanese children including Stephen in the school. The parents were told that they lack language skills.

Naomi remembers her school days and her mother going away from her forever. In Japan the fate stored for them was worse. Canada treated them in a cruel manner during the Second World War. She says:

In Canada, our community was facing smaller-scale nightmares. The effects of the Second World War began for us with wailing sirens, and frightening darkness when house lights and streetlights went out and matches could not be lit. And the whisperings began the furtive knocks on the doors, the searching looks in the faces of the adults. Voices become muted. Innocent people were called spies. There were lies in the newspapers. Missionaries occasionally sent letters of objection, and weeks later a tiny retraction might appear where no one would see it. (67)

Japanese Canadians had to leave their country or stay there as refugees. They lost their houses, jobs and security. When they suffered the Anglican Church didn’t help them. Aunt Emily says that the Church itself was made by the Japanese. But the Church betrayed them by practicing racism. They saw the Japs as the “other.” Aunt Emily considers them as oriental westerners.

Naomi remembers the death of her Obasan in 1975. Aunt Emily takes Naomi to Japan and then to Hawaii. She comes to know about her mother’s last days. She learns that in life, there is a speech that cannot be hidden, a word that will be heard. She hears her mother. She understands that silence speaks. Naomi reaches Hawaii in July 1976 and is comfortable with the group of Nisei. She sees that her ethnicity is an advantage there. Certain changes happen in Naomi.

Naomi moves to Toronto. Aunt Emily comes there in 1980. They go for the Japanese Canadian League’s meeting. Aunt Emily has got an irritated identification with the league. Earlier she had big dreams about it. She used to say: “History must not repeat itself. Human rights are our responsibility” (100). But the League deteriorated into a social club.

Naomi thinks about her inhibitions. She thinks that her problems are because of growing old. Aunt Emily questions her by saying about her invisibility. Aunt asks her to attend the redress meeting that demands compensation. She says that it does not seem that important to her. Aunt asks Father Cedric to speak to her. She says that she is not a part of the community and she does not know any Japanese Canadians in Toronto. She understands the fears inside her and her problems with heaven and hell that were made by Pastor Jim and his preaching.

Naomi is introduced to the group of Japanese Canadians in Toronto by Aunt Emily. She understands that she is familiar with many of the members. Aunt Emily is worried about the sansei (third generation) that they lack connections. Aunt wants Naomi to reject her silence.

Changes happen in Naomi. Father Cedric gives a new breath to her life. Naomi says: “This is the closest I have ever been to the prince’s ball. In this my autumn season, in this feminist era, I am opening the book of an untimely tale. Somewhere in the air are Cinderella’s slippers, and on earth, soft moccasins are dancing” (143). Naomi attains calmness. Her perspective on life changes. Father Cedric is like a godmother to her. She gets



interested in redress and Bridge magazine. She understands that the history of Japanese Canadians creates problems to the mainstream historians.

Japanese Canadians start working together. They think that they should have a voice in redress only if they have a strong national organization. Aunt Emily plans to quit from Bridge magazine due to office politics. Aunt Emily works hard for the rights of the Japanese Canadians. Anna and others who are a part of it work for their rights. It becomes a movement. They have problems with Nikki of the Japanese Canadian League (JCL) who seems to divide the Japanese Canadians. So they work with the Rainbow Coalition. The Rainbow Coalition is a group of lawyers, all women of colour, who have joined forces to fight racism. Even when the government tries to split them, they work together. Thus two groups are formed. One is the Moderate majority of Japanese Canadians who belong to Nikki and are associated with the young militant radical National Japanese Canadian League (NJCL) group. Aunt Emily and her group were addressed as traitors and dangerous by Dr. Stinson and Nikki who are part of the minister and people in government. Nikki says that a majority of Japanese Canadians are with them. Naomi says:

Aunt Emily does not say a word but I know what she is thinking. The lie is alive in the world. It was there in Nazi Germany. It's in South Africa. In Latin America. In every country in the world. This is why redress matters. Because there are many people intent on defending the oppressor's rights no matter what the truth, and they are in places of power. Not one of us, not a single one of us, was ever found guilty of a disloyal act against Canada. But the accusation remains. (230)

Nikki wins the election in her own way and she is supposed to preserve the voice of Japanese Canadians. It makes the whole Japanese community in Canada sad. NJCL still works for the redress. Aunt Emily meets with an accident. But she comes back. Naomi finds comfort in Father Cedric's care. Aunt Emily's movement for redress becomes a success. Naomi is a part of it now. They hear the Prime Minister's speech together in 1988. The Prime Minister says:

Nearly half a century ago, in the crisis of wartime, the Government of Canada wrongfully incarcerated, seized the property, and disenfranchised thousands of citizens of Japanese ancestry . . . To put things right . . . most of us in our own lives have had occasion to regret certain things we have done. Error is an ingredient of humanity. So too is apology and forgiveness. We all have learned from personal experience that, as inadequate as apologies are, they are the only way we can cleanse the past so that we may, as best we can, in good conscience face the future. (283)

They feel that they are Canadians and not the "others." Itsuka—someday the laughter is back to them. Naomi hears the breath of life. The fight for their life and voice becomes successful. The racism and othering is over.

Itsuka seems to talk about love, life, othering, racism and finally hope in a political manner. It historicizes the history of Japanese Canadians more politically. But *Itsuka* seems to be more political than *Obasan*. When *Obasan* wants the Japanese Canadians to raise their voice, *Itsuka* calls for action. In these novels the "Nisei" wants the "Issei" to break their silence and raise their voice for the sake of "Sansei" as the "Issei" always keep silence for the sake of their children. Both the novels try to talk about the history of Japanese Canadians which was silenced by the mainstream history.

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