

Obasan: The Politics of the Japanese-Canadian Internment

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Joy Kogawa is a well known Japanese-Canadian poet and novelist. Her award-winning autobiographical novel, *Obasan* (1981),¹ examines the personal wartime internment experience of the author through the fictionalized persona of Naomi Nakane and her Aunt Emily Kato. *Obasan*, the title character, is Naomi's other aunt, the one who raises her when World War II destroys the family. Emily is a political activist, the voice of protest and conscience in the novel, while the narrator, Naomi, has to work through her own silence and that of all Japanese-Canadians. As a novel with a dual voice, *Obasan* is able to probe the politics of the internment experience and its effect on the country as a whole as well as to demonstrate the internal, private damage to these loyal citizens who, as a minority group, kept their suffering quiet and were obedient. As Myrna Kostash says in "Japanese-Canadians: The Wartime Scar that Won't Heal":

This is a country in which it was possible to be a thinking, reading, inquiring person and not know, until the 1970s, of the Events. Not know that the Japanese of Alberta were not voluntarily among us. Not know of the plethora of Orders-in-Council that had emanated in a steady stream from the Cabinet of Makenzie King's government in the '40s. They were orders that began, nine days after Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941, with the registration as "enemy aliens" of *all* persons of Japanese origin (including citizens and the Canadian-born) and that concluded in 1949, when Japanese-Canadians were finally given the unconditional right to vote in federal elections. Not know of the trauma endured by some 23,000 people in our own midst.²

Although there have been capable non-fiction works published in Canada since 1970 about the internment, Joy Kogawa's book is the first novel to be written about the evacuation, internment, and dispersal of Canada's Japanese

during the war. *Obasan* is by far the most powerful fictional account of either the American or Canadian internment of citizens. Interestingly enough, and for a variety of reasons, most accounts of this historical event are autobiographical and most are by women. Autobiographies by the American writers Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, Mine Okubo, Monica Sone, Yoshiko Uchida, and Akemi Kikumura have filled this gap in our knowledge, but Kogawa's novel treats this experience in an exceptional way.

Some brief background on the Canadian policy helps to explain Emily Kato's shocking statements in *Obasan*. "I hate to admit it," she says, "but for all we hear about the States, Canada's capacity for racism seems even worse."

The American Japanese were interned as we were in Canada, and sent off to concentration camps, but their property wasn't liquidated as ours was. And look how quickly the communities reestablished themselves in Los Angeles and San Francisco. We weren't allowed to return to the West Coast like that. We've never recovered from the dispersal policy. But of course that was the government's whole idea—to make sure we'd never be visible again. Official racism was blatant in Canada. The Americans have a Bill of Rights, right? We don't.³

There were 23,000 Japanese-Canadians in 1941 and about five times as many Japanese Americans. On January 14, 1942, for the consideration of "military necessity," Ottawa announced that all Japanese male nationals aged 18-45, including World War I veterans, would be removed from the coast by April 1.

Order-in-Council P.C. 1486 empowered Minister of Justice Louis St. Laurent to evacuate from the 100-mile strategic zone of the B.C. coast *all* Japanese-Canadians. Order-in-Council P.C. 469 liquidated all their property. Internment camps were prepared in the Slocan Valley for women and children; able-bodied men were sent off to work camps. Families who wanted to stay together "volunteered" for the sugar-beet fields. In 1945, those still in the camps were given the choice of deportation to Japan or dispersal to "white" Canada, east of the Rockies. In 1950, the government announced it would pay out some \$1,200,000 as compensation for property losses on claims made by a minority of Japanese-Canadians that had totaled over \$5 million. "What this country did to us," says a character in *Obasan*, "it did to itself."⁴

The result of this policy of internment and dispersal was the death of a viable culture. For example, in 1941 8,500 Japanese-Canadians lived in Vancouver; in 1951, only 873 were left. In 1941, the Japanese population was two-thirds of the Chinese population; in 1971 it was only one-third of the Chinese population. "Soon we're going to disappear as an identifiable group," says Kiyoshi Shimizu, a social worker in Ottawa. "We're going to be lumped, in the census, under the category of 'Others.'"⁵

Since World War II Japanese Canadians have pursued acculturation with a vengeance. Inter-marriage is at the astonishingly high rate of 70-80%. The Japanese Canadians, like the Japanese Americans, are described as the “ideal” citizens, well-educated professionals, yet many Japanese Canadians have likened their wartime experience to rape and still experience the negative results of that personal invasion. According to sociologist Gordon Hirabayashi, the Issei didn’t get out of the internment camps psychologically until the 1980s, because the experience resulted in a “social rape” whereby the victim wants to bury the past because of the personal shame and sense of degradation rather than to take to the streets demanding justice. This response also explains existing stereotypes of Japanese social behavior in which silence and obedience are stressed; “it can’t be helped,” *Shigata ni gi*, so make the best of it. The rape victim first blames herself, not her victimizer, for what happened.

In 1971, with the publication of Shizuye Takashima’s *A Child in Prison Camp*, the remembering began in Canada. The third generation Sansei in Canada and America both led the fight for reparations. In 1977 some Nisei worked on a photographic exhibit, “A Dream of Riches,” commemorating 100 years of Japanese settlement in Canada just as the American exhibit, “Executive Order 9066,” opened up this chapter of American history in 1969. From this Centennial Project grew the Redress Committee which, in 1982, circulated a pamphlet in the Japanese-Canadian communities to stimulate discussion. The publication of Joy Kogawa’s novel suggests there is less reluctance to face this experience, although Kogawa herself says that Japanese Canadians don’t want to read this book because they don’t want to be reminded. “They don’t want to talk about it, think about it, write about it. If I hadn’t written it, I probably wouldn’t read it! ‘Give the pain to somebody else, let us live’ is what I think they’re saying.”⁶

Much of *Obasan* is about speech and silence, the two ways of dealing with social rape or cultural genocide. Until recently, the Japanese-Canadian response has been silence and, as a result, this history was buried, unavailable, or not understood. The second and third generations, particularly the Sansei, have emerged and have begun to speak out and write with indignation. The history is known. However, it has taken Joy Kogawa to make the reader *feel* and live this history through the fictionalization of her own childhood.

Aunt Emily Kato, Naomi’s mother’s younger sister, serves as the conscience and political voice of the novel. Through her, the reader gets this history in snatches. Through Emily, both the reader and the narrator learn of the horrible slow death her mother, stranded in Japan since 1941, suffers from the attack on Nagasaki in 1945. In the novel’s opening scene, Naomi is informed at school of her uncle’s death. It is August 9, 1972. She goes to visit Obasan, now in her 80s, and the family history, which has been kept back from the “children,” begins to emerge in flashback, piece by piece, as Naomi starts to read Aunt Emily’s long withheld papers, diaries, and letters.

In 1941 Naomi Nakane was a five-year old child surrounded by love and comfort in Vancouver. In September, her mother sails to Japan to visit an ailing grandmother and Naomi never sees or hears from her again. By 1942 the entire

family is hopelessly sundered. Naomi's father is sent to a work camp. His parents are interned in the Livestock Buildings at Vancouver's Hastings Park prison, an experience they do not long survive. Aunt Emily and her father are sent to Toronto. Naomi and her brother Stephen end up in the care of an uncle and her aunt, Obasan, in a small house in Slocan, British Columbia, an old ghost town which has been opened up for the internees.

In 1945, when they have begun to adapt, they are ordered to relocate to Granton, Alberta. About her years in a one-room shack on a beet farm here, Naomi writes "I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is not waking, only deeper and deeper sleep" (194). Nevertheless, she communicates the brutal enslavement of this harsh physical routine as she goes on to describe the details of this existence, moving from sleep or silence to speech.

Eventually Naomi becomes "Miss Nah Canny," a repressed school teacher in Cecil, another small Alberta town 150 miles north of Granton, living out her days in a cultural vacuum. She describes herself thus:

Marital status: Oldmaid. Health: Fine, I suppose. Occupation: School teacher. I'm bored to death with teaching and ready to retire. What else would anyone want to know? Personality: Tense. Is that past or present tense? It's perpetual tense. I have the social graces of a common housefly. That's self-denigrating, isn't it (7).

Stephen, on the other hand, has become a successful classical musician, has travelled the world performing, and now lives with his Parisian girlfriend in Montreal. His response to the pressure of the past is literally to run away from it. Once, while visiting Obasan, he gets up in the middle of the night and runs out from the shack in panic and down the road. Escape from memory and the past is only superficial.

At the end of the novel, with Naomi, we learn what became of her mother and the full horror of the Japanese experience hits. Naomi's mother and grandmother, along with other relatives, were in Nagasaki when the atom bomb was dropped on August 9, 1945. Her mother, taken to a hospital and expected to die, survives. She is so deformed that she wears a cloth mask for the rest of her brief life and refuses to communicate with her children. When she is finally allowed to return to Canada in 1950, she no longer wants to. About the same time Naomi's father has died of an operation in a distant hospital. Since 1942 he has only been with his children for a brief month or two in Slocan in 1945. About her mother, who died in 1950 or 1951, Naomi says:

There is no date on the memorial stone. There are no photographs ever again. 'Do not tell Stephen and Naomi,' you say. 'I am praying that they may never know.' . . . Martyr Mother, you pilot your powerful voicelessness over the ocean and across the mountain, straight as a missile to our hut on the edge of a sugar-beet field. You wish to protect us with lies, but the camouflage does not hide your cries. Beneath the hiding I am there with you (241-242).

This ending takes us full circle.

In the beginning, when Naomi is four, her life is secure and idyllic except for the secret presence of evil in the shape of Old Man Gower, the lecherous man next door. Naomi reveals, "Every time he carries me away, he tells me I must not tell my mother. He asks me questions as he holds me but I do not answer. It is not an isolated incident. . . (62). If I speak, I will split open and spill out . . . (63). I am ashamed" (64). This becomes the heavy secret, the one thing that Naomi cannot tell her mother. These episodes cut Naomi off from her mother long before the war begins. Naomi says:

But the secret has already separated us. The secret is this:
I go to seek Old Man Gower in his hideaway. I clamber
unbidden onto his lap. His hands are frightening and
pleasurable. In the centre of my body is a rift (65).

Years later there is Percy in Slocan who also traps Naomi, and she tells us there are others. Naomi admits that these encounters fill her "with a strange terror and exhilaration" (61). As an adult she has dreams of flight, terror, and pursuit, believing "The only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive" (61), the defense of the victim.

On another level, Old Man Gower can be seen as an image for the Canadian government separating the Japanese Canadians from each other in the great dispersion of World War II and making them feel ashamed and that somehow they were to blame for what happened to them. Jeanne Houston addresses the victim's internalization of ill treatment in *Farewell to Manzanar* by saying:

You cannot deport 110,000 people unless you have stopped seeing individuals. Of course, for such a thing to happen, there has to be a kind of acquiescence on the part of the victims, some submerged belief that this treatment is deserved, or at least allowable. It's an attitude easy for nonwhites to acquire in America. I had inherited it. Manzanar had confirmed it.⁷

As Gower is responsible for Naomi's separation from her mother, so the Canadian directives and the horror of war itself have decimated a once viable Japanese-Canadian culture and community. Naomi, however, believes that she must deserve this treatment; therefore, she may even subconsciously be responsible for the outcome. In her adult naiveté, Naomi reveals the depth of her own problem:

People who talk a lot about their victimization make me uncomfortable. It's as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind. From my years of teaching I know it's the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain (34).

What Naomi learns is that her silence has been her undoing, just as her mother's silence has orphaned her. Rather than protect the children, this misguided silence has cut them off from love, caring, and their own history. Naomi now carries on monologues with her mother:

Silent Mother, you do not speak or write. You do not reach through the night to enter morning, but remain in the voicelessness. . . . By the time this country opened its pale arms to you, it was too late. First you could not, then you chose not to come. Now you are gone. . . . Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction (241, 243).

Joy Kogawa overturns the meaning and purpose of the Japanese phrase, *Kodomo no tame*—for the sake of the children—*gaman shi mashi*—let us endure, because to save the children from the knowledge of her fate, Naomi's mother has left her children in the darkness of the unknown, in Old Man Gower's lap, until it is much too late. Through this process of remembrance and revelation, Naomi, and the author, free themselves from victimization by speaking out. Aunt Emily is vindicated.

While it would not work fictionally for Joy Kogawa to write in the genre of the protest novel, she is able to present her experiences artfully through Naomi and at the same time the historical facts through the militant indignation of Emily, made all the more real by Naomi's disinterest in protest and weary tolerance of Emily's meetings and speeches about the redress due Japanese Canadians. For example, Naomi says of Emily:

How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BS, MA, is a word warrior. She's a crusader, a little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes (32).

Emily uses the language of truth to discredit the government's perversion of language when she protests the use of language to disguise reality:

"Now look at this one," she said. "Here's a man who was looking for the source of the problem in the use of language. You know those prisons they sent us to? The government called them 'Interior Housing Projects'! With language like that you can disguise any crime" (34).

Yoshiko Uchida in her American autobiography, *Desert Exile*, makes the same point:

The term "evacuation" was the Army's official euphemism for our forced removal, just as "non-alien" was used when American citizen was meant. "Assembly center" and "relocation center," terms employed to designate the concentration camps in which we were incarcerated, were also part of the new terminology developed by the United States government and the Army to misrepresent the true nature of their acts.⁸

Naomi finally realizes that her own and her mother's silence, as well as that of Obasan and uncle, who bakes and eats "stone bread," has crippled her. These

people have allowed and accepted their victimization, hoping that silence would make the memories disappear. Uncle says, "This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude" (42). Emily cries, "What a bunch of sheep we were. Polite. Meek. All the way to the slaughterhouse door" (38). It is by speaking and writing about this chapter in history that the demons of blame and otherness are expelled. Kogawa wants to rescue the Japanese Canadians from the fate of Stephen, who has completely assimilated to the dominant culture in flight from his own, and from the alternative response of Obasan and Uncle, who remain hopelessly "foreign" and continue as silent, grateful victims of abuse.

Finally, while Japanese Americans were able to return to their communities at the end of the war, propertyless though they were, Canadians were not allowed to return to the West Coast until 1949 when restrictions were removed on April Fool's Day. This policy effectively destroyed what communities had existed prior to 1941 with the result that the Japanese Canadians tried to lose themselves in the white population and move away from any hint of ethnicity. As Naomi says, "None of my friends today are Japanese Canadians" (38). Rapid assimilation nearly destroyed the culture of people who have now begun to reverse the generation of silence to rediscover the joy of speech. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* is a beautifully wrought exorcism of the public and private politics of racism.

Notes

¹*Obasan* won the 1981 Books in Canada First Novel Award, The Canadian Author's Association 1982 Book of the Year Award, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation in San Francisco.

²*Chatelaine* (June, 1983): 166.

³(Boston: David R. Godine, 1984): 33-34. All further quotations from *Obasan* will be indicated by page number in the text.

⁴*Chatelaine*, 166.

⁵*Chatelaine*, 174.

⁶*Chatelaine*, 170.

⁷(New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1974), 114.

⁸(Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1982), 52.