Chapter II

Breaking the Silence: Obasan

Japanese-Canadian Literature can be interpreted as an ongoing construction of identity at numerous levels: individual, collective, political, cultural and generational. Japanese-Canadian authors have grappled with major issues of their times and in the process have examined the boundaries of ethnicity and nationality, often arriving at increasingly complex definitions of Japanese-Canadian identity. Their identity is complex as they consider themselves as Canadians whereas the Canadian Government reject their claim of being Canadian.

'Generational identity' has been central to the "Nikkei", the term used to refer to people of Japanese ancestry living in South America and Canada. Japanese-Americans have developed distinct terms for each generation: 'Issei' refers to the first generation immigrants who arrived in Hawaii and the U.S. mainland between 1885 and 1924, 'Nisei' to the second-generation immigrants, and 'Sansei' to the third generation.

Canada became a choice for the Japanese people to immigrate to around the nineteenth century, when most Japanese immigrants were looking for a place to live, to fish and to grow food. During the Second World War Canada was with the U.S.A. When Japan joined Germany and Italy, enemy countries, and bombed Pearl Harbour, no Canadians were killed, but it created a serious problem for the Japanese-Canadians. They were now seen as the enemy.
Together with Italian and German immigrants, Japanese-Canadian families were deracinated with no hope or scope of future in Canada.

Their suffering began on 8th December, 1941, a day after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. Within hours of this attack the Canadian government ordered confiscation of the property of Japanese-Canadians. Aged people were sent to prisons, other men to camps where they were subjected to rigorous labour; and women and children were sent to the outskirts of Canada. The only option given to the Japanese-Canadians was to return to Japan or to follow the orders of the Canadian authorities unconditionally. The avowed purpose of this national exercise was to discourage people of Japanese origin from turning into spies. According to Finlay:

For generations, the British Columbians had been looking for a means of eliminating 'Orientals' from their province. Asian new-comers were the objects of mob violence in the nineteenth century and legal discrimination in the twentieth. First there were immigration restrictions for those already in the country: there was a denial of basic civil rights, such as the right to vote. Consequently when war broke out against Japan in December 1941, racism became 'patriotic' and a golden opportunity was seized for the complete elimination of the hated minority. (385)

Joy Kogawa, a Nisei, a second generation Canadian has drawn upon her own experience as a displaced Canadian. In her
novel *Obasan* (1981) she writes a unified story of a battered and broken family that endures under worst conditions. Kogawa herself mentions in an interview with Karlyn Koh: "*Obasan* is strongly autobiographical. Like Noami, I became a person who would not speak, would not ask a question, did not expect to be heard" (21).


*Obasan* is a highly moving, highly crafted lyrical and meditative account of a Japanese-Canadian family's experience of anti-Japanese racism in Canada during the Second World War. It shows how much hatred can cost when it is turned into a principle, whether the price is in terms of personal happiness or the life of an entire culture.

*Obasan* describes in detail the national Canadian discourse by counterpoising the official documentation with the personal story of the minority who expose their plight. As Arnold Davidson observes in his book *Writing Against the Silence: Joy Kogawa's Obasan*.

because it prompts the painful awareness that this racism was carried to an almost Nazi excess, *Obasan* is for Canada a kind of hall of shame, it also shows us at least partly how to get out. The indictment of the book
is, by extension, a call to action, a demand that something be done to oppose, to set right, as much as possible, the wrongs exposed. (14)

At the political level, Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* is a courageous indictment of the Canadian government’s racist policy towards its Japanese-Canadian community. Narrating both the political scenario and personal experience, Kogawa presents the archetypal experience of human suffering and human endurance.

Canada is a multicultural country but after reading this novel one feels that white native Canadians occupy a higher status. *Obasan* questions this indifference. Kogawa remarks in her article “Is there a Just Cause?”: “By silence, I could be a collaborator in chaos, guilty before conscience of inaction where action was required. So I am speaking publicly now about these matters...” (21).

In *Obasan*, Noami, the protagonist is drawn between a duty of silence, hiding her pain to honour Japanese heritage which lays emphasis on silent endurance of hardships, and a desperate need to speak, to ask questions which always haunted her. *Obasan* is generally classified as a historiographic metafiction which according to Linda Hutcheon is a fiction that “is intensely self-reflexive art, but is also grounded in historical, social and political realities” (13).

*Obasan* is a self-reflexive novel. The term self-reflexivity suggests a negation of the mimetic principle. Literature does not
reflect the world, nature or reality; it reflects, and draws attention to, itself. This self-reflection is usually achieved by constantly referring to other art forms, the sister arts and by postulating some connections between the way these other art forms are managed and the way the particular novel itself is managed.

In *Obasan* Kogawa refers to diary entries of Aunt Emily and newspaper clippings kept by her and frames the narrative by time and again referring to them. In Chapter fourteen Kogawa through diary entries and newspaper clippings acquaints the reader with the larger Canadian scenario.

Another significant feature of a self-reflexive novel is that it introduces one or several artist figures. These artist figures are shown struggling with their individual art or medium. Aunt Emily in *Obasan* is one such character who struggles for redressal, as Noami describes her:

> All her life, it seemed to me, Aunt Emily toiled to tell of the lives of the Nisei in Canada in her effort to make familiar, to make knowable, the treacherous yellow peril that lived in the minds of the radically prejudiced. I pictured her as a young woman in Toronto, gradually getting more hunched as she sat over her typewriter, growing grey over the years, erasing, rewriting, underlining, trying to find the right mix that strikes home. Like Cupid, she aimed for the heart. But the heart was not there. (40)
Kogawa through her narrator, Noami Nakane, explores the relationship between language and history, not only because of the manipulative power of language to create different versions of “truth” but also because of the impossibility of language ever conveying absolute truth. As Coral Ann Howells observes, Kogawa is acutely aware of the multiple possibilities within language, of its power to distort and lie which is matched only by power to create texts of subtly interwoven images which shadow the life of the psyche.

Obasan embeds different ‘Issei’, ‘Nisei’, and ‘Sansei’ experiences of history in one book. The ‘Issei’, first generation immigrants, are silent, accept everything, do not question, believe in silent endurance. The ‘Nisei’, second generation immigrants, question the silence, while the ‘Sansei’, third generation immigrants, are rebellious and do not accept a marginalised position.

While history is tied to our identity and historical sources are necessary fragments in piecing together a collective history, a personal perspective helps us to see the past more clearly. For this Kogawa has chosen a protagonist Noami whose “perspective is internally dialogized as she anticipates other people’s views and their reactions, and thus creates a microdialogue in her mind” (qtd in Helms 34), which helps her in forming an objective way of perceiving reality.
Obasan represents an attempt to reconnect fragmented families, generations, and communities and to recover silenced voices. Obasan functions as testimonial literature, a literature of personal witness which is concerned with “a problematic collective social situation” (qtd in Xu 31). According to Doris Sommer “testimonials are related to a general text of struggle” (129). Struggle is a recurring theme in Kogawa’s work, especially as constitutive inevitable element of national identity. It is through this struggle of shared experience and memory that she is able to arrive at an understanding of her own self, her people, and her country, Canada. The only way, it seemed, that Japanese Canadians could survive the trauma during this period was to assimilate and hide their conflicting subject positions as Kogawa did until she wrote Obasan.

In Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (1992) Dori Laub describes the painful but healing effects of Holocaust survivors bearing witness to the massive trauma of their experience. Because of severe trauma, survivors often prefer sheltering silence to the painful recounting of their experience. According to Laub, their acts of bearing witness begin “with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of the occurrence” (52). In Obasan Noami bears witness to the trauma of dispossession, displacement, and dispersal within Canada, and the loss of her mother in the nuclear holocaust of Nagasaki. Noami’s
process of bearing witness to these events begins with an absence, a "silence that does not speak" (epigraph). As Manina Jones observes:

The novel thematizes and puts into play the narrative impulse both to search for a particular story and to search for an alternate, potentially redemptive form of telling that resists narrative closure, that both speaks out of historical silences and literally takes into account its own status as telling, as search grounded in historical/textual re-search... The enigma [of Noami’s mother’s disappearance] is metonymy that draws attention to its metonymic status, to the fact that it “stands in for” what is not present, and in doing so conceals an absence. For both reader and narrator, “Kodomo no tame”, and the letter on the blue paper written in Japanese are “pure signifiers”, mere markers. They foreground the fact that the concealment is accomplished by language. (223-24)

Kogawa, like other postcolonial writers, claims memory as the means to retrieve the truth and takes the help of memory in her novel. As King Kok Cheung mentions, Kogawa through her presentation of Noami’s history, “counters historical manipulation of fact with novelistic record; in opposition to the social memory she offers Noami’s personal memorial” (52). The necessity of recalling the past for survival is a compelling instinct as is revealed in the novel by Aunt Emily who says:
You are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene. Look at you, Nomi, shuffling back and forth between Cecil and Granton, unable either to go or to stay in the world with even a semblance of grace or ease. (49-50)

Again and again Noami is entrapped in the whirlpool of her memories.

When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles. (26)

She keeps on thinking about her home in Vancouver and all the other places where they were relocated by the Canadian Government. The trope of memory is used to foreground the part of experience ignored or suppressed so as to make it accessible to contemporary readers. Memory is made all the more important in Obasan because history has attempted to elide the very existence of Japanese-Canadians, and their memory of events has been rendered meaningless in the context of the dominant narrative of the Second World War. Memory, like experience, is related to speech. Western conceptualizations of history generally assume a close association between telling and remembering. Yet it is the narration, through speech which in the case of Obasan unravels silence, that in fact shapes both memory and experience.
Kogawa uses memory not in a mechanical, monologic sense to recount and record facts and experience but in an active way for construction or reconstruction of the past. Her narrative meanders through time and space, moving back and forth, bringing out the various psychic levels of meaning. Kerwin Lee Klein remarks:

Freed from the constraints of individual psychic states, memory becomes a subject in its own right, free to range back and forth across time, and even the most rigorous scholar is free to speak the memory of an ethnic, religious, or racial group. The prosaic emancipation is tremendous, for an author can freely move from memories as individual psychic events to memories as shared group consciousness to memories as a collection of material artifacts and employ the same psychoanalytical vocabularies throughout. The new ‘materialization’ of memory thus grounds the elevation of memory to the status of a historical agent, and we enter a new age in which archives remember and statues forget. (136)

As Noami says: “The tension everywhere was not clear to me then and is not much clearer today. Time has solved few mysterious wars and rumours of wars, racial hatreds and fears are with us still” (77-78).

The narrative thus produced engages the readers on the psychical level of the consequences of deracination and also the psychological wounds inflicted on the individual. Memory expands
the historical sense by incorporating not only the ways of knowing but also the ways of feeling. For Noami who was a young child at the time of internment, all these issues were beyond her understanding. In the beginning of Chapter Twelve she acquaints the reader with her mental state at that time:

IT IS AROUND THIS TIME THAT MOTHER DISAPPEARS. I hardly dare to think, let alone ask, why she has to leave. Questions are meaningless. What matters to my five-years-old mind is not the reason that she is required to leave, but the stillness of waiting for her to return. After a while, the stillness is so much with me that it takes the form of a shadow which grows and surrounds me like air. Time solidifies, ossifies the waiting into molecules of stone, dark microscopic planets that swirl through the universe of my body waiting for light and the morning. (66)

She tries to find answers to her questions: "After all these years I find myself wondering, but with the dullness of expecting no response" (26). Silence in post-colonial literary texts, as Yiming Ren observes:

connects the issues of language and national character together, while in the works written by female post-colonial writers it is the prescription given to colonial females by social gender role. (1)
In narratives rooted in an analysis of the margins of class, 'silence' conveys deprivation more than speech, and it is often suggested and revealed that the 'margins' always find a way to decode their experience into a truth-revealing story.

Kogawa explores the varying natures of silence, its oppressiveness as the mechanism of secrets but also its symbolism as a sign of strength and courage. She herself mentions: “I have a great deal of respect for cultures of silence. My first language was silence; my second was speech. I understand the language of silence; yet I need a lot of communication” (Koh 22).

Kogawa’s representation of silence is in keeping with Dori Laub’s theory of testimony. Laub suggests that the one who listens to stories of extreme trauma should also listen to and hear the silence of the survivor. In order to trace this silence Noami, the protagonist of Oobasan, will have to free herself from self-imposed bondage, which in her case is a rejection of the past, and hear the absent and silent voices of her damaged community. She must ‘own’ her story and let herself belong to this history of suffering and survival. This process is referred to as ‘decolonization’ which refers to a “process of thorough social transformation”. Helen Tiffin emphasizes that decolonization is “a process, not an arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversions of them” (95). It dismantles forms of colonial rule which “emphasized the reconstruction of hierarchical relations of religion, culture, language and especially race” (Lowe 108).
Kogawa’s novel at once presents a counterhistory of Japanese-Canadian experiences during the war and suggests that readers should examine the very concept of history being easily accessible through experience. In the beginning she thanks several individuals as well as the Public Archives of Canada for permission to use documents and letters from the files of Muriel Kitagawa, Grace Tucker, Jean Suzuki and Gordon Nakayama. About such documentation David Palumbo Liu writes:

It is from these documents that Kogawa, like her protagonist Noami, constructs her narration that juxtaposes the cold, orderly dictates of the Canadian Government with the personal correspondence of the Japanese-Canadians – the history of the dominant ideology versus the “unauthorised” minority representation of that historical moment. And they are unauthorised because those who wrote the texts are denied status as authors of history; they can only be subjects of it and subjected to it. (106)

Silence became the prevailing condition not only because others refused to acknowledge Japanese Canadians but also because they were unable to speak to one another. The accusations, the shame, and the confusion of internment rendered the imprisoned speechless while fragmenting their communities and families, dividing them through silence.

Silence “is the central trope of Obasan” (qtd in Jackwhite 67), a recurrent motif that appears with all its negative implications,
alienation and suppression, and all its positive manifestations as well as a sign of dignity and endurance. Kogawa shows great respect towards the silence that the 'Isseis', the first generation maintained. Nevertheless when she deals with protective silence, she is able to perceive both its positive and negative aspects, since though this kind of silence is well intended, it produces undesirable effects upon people who are overprotected, as then it becomes difficult for them to face the reality. As Gurleen Grewal observes:

The narrative oscillates between Aunt Emily's forthright and cleansing vociferousness, her "billions of letters and articles and speeches, her tears and her rage", and Noami's quiet and haunting meditations on the past, informed by Uncle and Obasan's stoic language of silence. That is, the narrative moves between the documentary realm of public facts to the undocumented world of emotions, the shadowy world of memories of the lived and livid history that eludes documentation. Registering the necessity of both facts and the subjective truths of memory – the novel alternates between these two modes of understanding the past – Kogawa clearly values and enacts the "drifting meaning" [which according to her] evades speech. (147)

Kogawa begins her novel with a poetic passage from Revelation:

To him that overcometh
will I give to eat
of the hidden manna
and will give him
a white stone
and in the stone
a new name written....

The passage from Revelation suggests a promise of renewal and the possibility of language. The stone of the epigraph is a 'white stone', a bearer of language which is associated with survival. In the second passage which is poetic prose Kogawa forms a dichotomy between speech and silence:

There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone.

I admit it.

I hate the stillness. I hate the stone. I hate the sealed vault with its cold icon. I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes.
Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream.

If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply. (epigraph)

Kogawa writes about silence; she elaborates that she wants to question this silence which is mysterious, has hidden a lot of secrets in it. The speech which frees itself comes from the womb of the mother, who is absent. Hatred for the vault indicates the type of process that will be adopted by the narrator. The protagonist will disturb the stillness, defy the icons that have failed her. Words of the family members are scars for her as they do not tell about things about which the protagonist in particular is curious and wishes to know. The protagonist will trail on the path of silence to find answers to her questions. It is the purpose of Kogawa's life and writings to reveal the plight of the Japanese-Canadians.

The novel is a quest of Noami Nakane for a meaningful identity and for self-sustaining dignity in a post-colonial world which has hardly outlived the effects of colonialism. This is revealed when Mr Barker, owner of the farm at Alberta, comes to console Obasan (that is how Noami addresses her Aunt) after Uncle's death: he refers to the internment episode and says: "It was
a terrible business what we did to our Japanese” (225). Noami feels agitated and her tone changes; she thinks that in spite of their full loyalty towards Canada, Canadians are not ready to accept them as their countrymen. “These are icebreaker questions that create an awareness of ice” (225). Stuart Hall defines cultural identity in terms of:

One shared culture, a sort of collective one true self; hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable and unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (110-11)

The second way of thinking about cultural identity recognizes the significance of “difference” (Hall 112). It acknowledges “its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities” of cultural identity (Hall 112). In this sense cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as well as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identity comes from somewhere, has a history. But, like everything which

is historical, cultural identities undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some
essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narrative of the past. (Hall 112)

The identity of Noami Nakane falls in the second category. The novel is her search for her identity which is yet to be comprehended. The name of the protagonist ‘Noami’ pronounced as ‘No-me’ suggests that she has no personal self. She describes herself as follows:


Noami Nakane, a Sansei or third generation Japanese Canadian, faces a tragic dilemma as she searches for her lost roots in Canada. In a larger context, Kogawa shows that Noami’s predicament was the general predicament of thousands of people whose history and heritage, nurtured by the Isseis (first generation
immigrants) was challenged and destroyed by the Government’s racist policy. Her description of herself shows that she is always troubled with her identity. She is both a ‘being’ and ‘becoming that is transforming’ (Hall 112). Noami’s main identity problem is due to loss of her mother with whom she identified. Her mother’s absence remains enigmatic until the end of the novel. Noami’s loss of her mother is her loss of identity. Her quest for being once again with her mother and her search for identity echo what Stuart Hall says “the endless desire to return to ‘lost origin’... to go back to the beginning” (‘Cultural, Identity and Diaspora’ 120).

Noami’s uncovering of the story of their displacement and her mother’s absence and disfigurement represents her personal and political struggle to position herself within multiple tellings, identities and locations. She searches for a voice in the rupture of home and absence of mother.

Noami is a Japanese world where ‘nao’ means straight and ‘mi’ means beautiful. The name itself combines both Japanese and western cultures, suggesting that Noami is a hybrid, who occupies a hyphenated existence between two cultures. Noami is a hybrid also in the sense of being a product of two cultures. There is a continual tension between Japanese and Canadian elements. As Erika Gottlieb observes Kogawa’s style “is the result of extensive linguistic experimentation, presenting us with the special flavour of Japanese Canadians speech patterns and their underlying sensibilities” (39).

Throughout the novel Japanese and Canadian words are blended. Kogawa explains instead of translating the basic
differences behind separate linguistic systems. Noami’s sympathies are with Canada and those of her relatives who had made Canada their home.

Noami shows both Japanese values and Canadian values through her different ways of referring to other characters. She uses ‘Obasan’ for Aunt Aya who believes in Japanese values and Aunt Emily for another who is verbally articulate and fights for Canadian redress from the Canadian government. There are two options available to Noami to lead her life. Her Aunt Emily, who is politically articulate and demands justice from the Canadian authorities or her brother Stephen who denies the relevance of history and his Japanese roots. Noami’s case is different and her understanding comes from a different perspective which is that of her other aunt, who has raised her.

This aunt referred to as Obasan is an ‘Issei’, first generation immigrant, who follows Japanese values. For her, silence is not being passive. She refuses to question the authorities and silently accepts her lot. However, her silence is not passive but a metaphor of resistance. For Noami “She is the old woman of many Japanese legends” (54) who follows Japanese way of life. In the case of Obasan it seems that silence propels a traumatized body to grow, gain strength, and survive. As Noami says:

The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful.

(14)
Noami says that Obasan’s physical appearance “reminds [her of] hands that toil but do not embrace – of the wings of a wounded bird” (24) who suffered without any fault.

Noami envisions Obasan in the grips of some incarnation of history which consumes those who can no longer resist:

The past hungers for her. Feasts on her. And when its feasting is complete? She will dance and dangle in the dark, like small insect bones, a fearful calligraphy – a dry reminder that once there was life flitting about in the weather. (26)

Obasan and Uncle act as the threshold for the past where Noami and her brother Stephen’s entry is forbidden. The silencing of the events in Nagasaki for their sake is the motive of Uncle and Obasan’s silence. The silence however further gives rise to conflicts in the identity of Noami; as Cheung says:

The novel depicts the plight of a child who does not know and cannot tell. Noami has been withdrawn throughout childhood and adolescence: her quiet disposition seems to be tied to her mother’s unexplained absence. As a girl she questions but receives no answers: as an adult she desists because she [...] dreads knowing. (31)

However, in the end it is through Obasan’s help that Noami traces the family history as she is the one who has kept Aunt Emily’s diaries and journals. Noami describes her as follows:
Squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world...
Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. 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. (15-16)

Obasan takes care of Stephen and Noami and acts as their surrogate mother. She is the one who takes care of them when they are forced to leave Vancouver and resettle in Slocan and then in Alberta. For Obasan 'her home' is her 'identity' as it gives her a sense of belongingness which Canada as a country rejected. As Noami says, "This house is now her blood and bones" (15). She keeps all old items and does not dispose them of.

The house is indeed old, as she is also old. Every homemade piece of furniture, each pot holder and paper doily is a link in her lifeline. She has preserved in shelves, in cupboards, under beds – a box of marbles, half-filled colouring books, a red, white and blue rubber ball. The items are endless. Every short stub pencil, every cornflakes box stuffed with paper bags and old letters is of her ordering... (15)

Susan Stewart in her book, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1984) refers to C. Montessori, who recommends that every house should possess a 'museum'. Just as the attic stores the objects of the past,
Obasan's body and mind actively store memories of the past. She collects old items as souveniers to renew her everlasting memories. To a certain extent, she is empowered by the silence of collecting and reviewing those old items as a ritual of psychological consolation that she and her family were comfortably settled in the past. Every time she reviews those items in the attic, her sense of temporality becomes a meaningless flow. Those collected objects are “to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present” (Stewart 139). Noami calls Obasan “Our Lady of the Left-Overs” (45). In terms of the locus of the collection Stewart remarks:

The actual locale of the Souvenier is often commensurate with its material worthlessness: the attic and the cellar, contexts away from the buisness and engagement of everyday life... but the attic and the cellar are tied to the temporality of the past, and they scramble the past into a simultaneous order which memory is invited to rearrange... (150)

In an interview, Kogawa remarked that she chose the name of Obasan as the title of her novel because this aunt “is totally silent” and added: “if we never see Obasan, she will always be oppressed” (Wayne 23). Both Obasan as a character and Obasan the novel articulate the silences and wounds of history that cannot speak directly.

The novel begins with a date, August 9, 1972, the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Uncle and Noami visit the
coulee: The coulee is a special place for Uncle as it reminds him of the sea. Kogawa uses the image of the sea to describe the 'Prairies'. According to Cheryl Lousley, Kogawa makes

the landscape central to her narrative, Kogawa implicitly writes back and disrupts the nationalist, and Eurocentric 'nature thematic' in Canadian Literature and the popular and literary coding of rural and prairie as white [...] Kogawa ‘does not present prairies as alien white but establishes connection with them.’ (202)

Uncle sees these grasses and compares them to waves; these grasslands provide him a sense of flow.

Uncle used to build ships, but now their business has been lost Uncle and Noami rest near a stop near an old Indian buffalo jump, and Noami suddenly thinks of Chief Sitting Bull, another man displaced by war and racial hatred:

About a mile east is a spot which was once an Indian buffalo jump, a high steep cliff where the buffalo were stampeded and fell to their deaths. All the lions are still there, some sticking right out of the side of a fresh landslide. (2)

Kogawa bridges other times and cultures estimated by historical facts of differences. As B.A. Andrews notes: "Kogawa unites the red and yellow skinned peoples of Canada through their mutual love of the land, their silence and their will to survive" (45).
Noami’s presence with Uncle signals that she is also yearning to belong to a place. As she says:

My fingers tunnel through a tangle of roots till the grass stands up from my knuckles, making it seems that my fingers are the roots. I am part of this small forest like the grass, I search the earth and the sky with a thin but persistent thirst. (3)

In this passage the image of roots generates multiple meanings. Noami and her family were deracinated from their homes and yearn to belong, to be rooted firmly to a place. At the same time, Noami searches for her roots as she emerges from a willed amnesia and tries her best to understand some of the mysteries of her life. The grass’s thirst for life-giving groundwater thus figures Noami’s desire for answers to her questions. Right at the outset the reader is made aware that there is something which is hidden from Noami: “Whatever he was intending to tell me ‘someday’ has not yet been told” (3). In the first chapter Kogawa makes a connection with the epigraph which also talks of a hidden voice and an underground stream. Noami’s descent to a place where she hears the movement of water – “At the bottom of the coulee I can hear the gurgling of the slowly moving water” (4)—signals Noami’s journey back to her past. The movement of water signals continuation in their lives which will emerge after the scabs of past are healed. The chapter focuses on some impending changes which will take place in the life of the protagonist.
In the second chapter, the action moves forward eighteen years when uncle has died and Noami goes to Obasan to comfort her. Obasan takes Noami to the attic. There are spiders in their webs in the attic. This in a way suggests that like spiders Noami will also go in the web of her own memories. Noami time and again wonders why her mother went to Japan. In spite of Obasan’s love she longs for her mother: “But even with Obasan’s warmth and constant presence, there is an ominous sense of cold and absence – darkness that has crept into the house” (68-69). Her journey to bury the dead leads her into the treacherous territory of memory; she returns to her childhood and the most repetitive question of her life, “Why did my mother not return?”:

We’re trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead – all our dead – those who refuse to bury themselves. Like threads of old spider webs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart.[...] Just a glimpse of a worn-out patchwork quilt and old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return? After all these years, I find myself wondering, but with the dullness of expecting no response. (26)

When Noami reaches Obasan’s house, the first thing she notices is the ‘stone bread’ which uncle used to cook. It is a metaphor used by Kogawa to suggest how Japanese-Canadians endured the indifferent attitude of Canadian authorities. In their desperation to prove themselves Canadians the Japanese-Canadian
obediently accepted the extremely harsh terms imposed by the government. They participated in the War as soldiers of Canada. The 'stone bread' is a symbol of endurance which these people have shown. Obasan takes Noami to the attic.

The attic is symbolic of memories which both Obasan and Noami have suppressed. According to Arnold Davidson:

[Noami’s] attic philosophy admits of four basic possibilities: one can shut oneself up in the past as Obasan has done; one can flee the past as Noami’s brother has done; one can use it as a convenient junk room where anything and everything can be consigned; or one can view it as a repository that allows and even requires ordering and sorting of information and experience. (266)

Noami follows the fourth option. It is with the help of Obasan who has kept Aunt Emily’s papers that Noami gets to know about her past. Obasan believes:

Everything is forgetfulness. The time of forgetting is now come. (30)

For forgetting one should first reconcile oneself with one’s past. Only then one is at peace with the inner self. Noami always wanted to bury the past. She does not want to face the past:

...Crimes of history, I thought to myself, can stay in history. What we need is to concern ourselves with the injustices of today. Expedience still demands decisions...
which will one day be judged unjust. Out loud I said, “Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?” (41-42).

But Aunt Emily believes: “Reconciliation can’t begin without mutual recognition of facts” (183). Aunt Emily tells Noami that Japanese families were fractured and separated, permanently destroyed. The choice to go east of the Rockies or to Japan was presented without time for consultation with separated parents and children. Failure to choose was labeled non-cooperation. Throughout the country, the pressure was on. (183)

With great reluctance Noami begins her journey backwards till she reaches those undifferentiated, preconscious levels of experience. In surrendering to the memories that come back to her mind she will have to remember the incidents which always disturbed her.

The novel moves back in time. Noami begins her journey by watching old photographs which help her remember a happy past, of which only shadows are left. Noami sees old photographs where both her paternal and maternal families are standing together. Phu Thy observes:

[Each photograph] not only enables Noami ['s] access to memory but also, indeed, in the creative reconstituting development of photography, analogizes memory itself. Studying the photo of her childhood self and her long-lost mother, Noami muses on the
unassailable distance between her present and the past
that she mourns, that the photo conjures up. (124)

Contemplating the old picture of her mother and herself, Noami
recalls their house in Vancouver: “It is more splendid than any
house I have lived in since. It does not bear remembering. None of
these bears remembering” (60). Noami narrates her memories of the
splendid house and of the beautiful old days in the present tense
and of their relocation years in past tense. As Rufus Cook notes,
“Narrating an incident in the past tense has the effect of subtly
distancing or objectifying it, or relegating it to another order of
experience from our own...” (84).

Noami is engulfed by loving silence in childhood. She does
not have to speak about her basic needs. There is food before she
asks for it. “A sweater covers [her] before there is any chill and if
there is pain there is care simultaneously” (56). Obasan teaches
Noami to be selfless and not ‘wagamama’ a Japanese word for
being selfish. Noami says that she was not a silent baby from the
beginning but from the moment her mother left for Japan there
came a change in her behaviour.

Noami describes how her “Grandpa Nakane, number one boat
builder” arrived in Canada “wearing a Western suit, round black
hat, and platformed geta on his feet” (19). Her grandfather’s
mixture of traditional and Western dress suggests an affirmation of
the culture he left behind and it also suggests a desire to look
forward to a future in which he would become an integrated
member of Canada. Noami describes how her grandfather started a
boat building business and settled there. Their family was not monolithic but multicultural. All the members of the Nakane family were hybrid. They believed in both Western religion and Eastern belief. As Noami mentions:

Obasan's behaviour is as much Buddhist as Christian. She moves with equal ease in Christian and Buddhist Burial ceremonies, always ready with her serving hands. (132)

Grandpa Nakane was a Buddhist, the other members of the family believed in Christianity. They continue to cling to this religion even in their adverse circumstances. Christianity is an emblem of the colonial power. But these people follow the teaching of endurance and forgiveness from Christianity. The clergy however rejects them and they experience racism in church. Nakayama-Sensei, who is a Japanese priest, tries to comfort the Japanese-Canadians. He arranges the mass ceremonies and uses both Japanese and English words in the prayers and prays for forgiveness for Canadian people.

After the death of Grandma Nakane Christian funeral service was held. But after the service later in the evening Grandma Nakane's coffin was carried in a truck upto old silver mine for cremation. When Noami watches her funeral she starts thinking in terms of her Christian beliefs: “It's in the heat of fire where the angel is found” (155).
For the Oriental people home and family are of supreme importance. Home is something which provides them their identity. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbour during World War II, Canada banned free movement of the Japanese-Canadians. They were treated as enemies and were forced to leave their homes. Only Canadian born persons were allowed to stay in Canada, the others were asked to leave for Japan. Their properties were confiscated. Noami's mother who had gone to Japan was not allowed to come back. As Homi K. Bhabha asserts:

In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon as a vision that is divided as it is disorienting [...] To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the unhomely be easily accommodated in that familiar division of the social life into private and the public spheres. The unhomely moments creeps upon you as stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself [...] making the measure of you dwelling in a state of "incredulous terror". (445)

*Obasan* presents a forced movement from the civilized space of Vancouver to the wild space of both Granton and Alberta. Like the homes of the Japanese-Canadians, Canada itself as a political and geographical space became unhomely for the Japanese-Canadian
community where they once moved freely and which they considered as their home.

Noami’s experience of the unhomely is best captured by Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘unhomeliness’. Bhabha uses this term to describe the experience of the colonized whose homes, like Noami’s have been invaded, destroyed or relocated physically or culturally in such a way that identity is denaturalized from any reference to nation or language into an unstable, hybrid and liminal position. Noami narrates her experience with a widower with whom she had gone for dinner. The first thing which he enquires about is: “Where do you come from? ... ‘How long have you been in this country?’” (7). Noami also tells that in beginning of every academic session parents look at her with a strange expression on their faces. She says that she fails to understand this: “Was it my youthfulness or my oriental face?” (6). As Cecily Devereux observes:

cultural discrimination, like gender discrimination, begins at the body, which always visually identifies otherness in relation to the dominant group. The body is a sign of alterity, and is therefore the first and most important place to be taken as ‘the enemy’, an identification subsequently internalized. (234)

With the help of her own memories and Aunt Emily’s diary Noami tries to trace her past. Obasan has tied a ‘twine’ to Aunt Emily’s papers. Noami’s task is to unfold the twine and to unravel the mystery of her mother’s absence. Emily Kato’s diary is a fictional device used by Kogawa to acquaint the reader with the
atrocities committed by the Canadian government. Kogawa admits that she almost became Aunt Emily while writing *Obasan*.

She was never part of my being, but then she invaded me, her consciousness took over... I am not the same person as I was. What has changed me is that which changes us when we give birth. We plunge in and dare to do something which we thought we were unable to do. (P.I.)

In Aunt Emily's papers the past appears:

...PILED AS NEATLY as the thin white wafers in Sensei's silver box—symbols of communion, the materials of communication, white papers bread for the mind's meal. (182)

Noami believes that the hard stone bread of Uncle is broken down in the form of Aunt Emily's papers. When Noami first comes across the journal she feels a need to read it:

The book feels heavy with voices from the past—connection to Mother and Grandma Kato I did not know existed. I feel a strong urge to put everything aside and read the journal. (46)

Aunt Emily's diary helps Noami to understand how they were deracinated. The diary is addressed to Noami's mother whom Aunt Emily used to call Nesan, 'elder sister' in Japanese. The word 'Nesan' triggers pain in Noami who starts thinking about her
mother's absence. For Noami Aunt Emily is Habakkuk of the New Testament.

...In seven canonical words, she exhorts, cajoles, commands someone -- herself? me? -- to carry on the fight, to be a credit to the family, to strive onwards to the goal. She's the one with vision. (31)

Another item of Aunt Emily's package is a grey cardboard folder with suggests that it has some unknown facts in it:

Inside the folder are two envelops about as narrow and long as bank cheques, and inside each envelop are blue-lined-rise-paper sheets with Japanese writing which I cannot read. (45)

The secrets of the letters are unveiled in the end by Nakayama Sensei.

For Aunt Emily to seek justice from the Canadian authorities is her only goal. She demands an answer for the wrongs committed against her community. This is made clear in the first few pages of the novel when Noami is browsing through Aunt Emily's parcel. She notes that every time the words "Japanese race" appeared in the news articles or in pamphlets, Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written "Canadian citizens". Aunt Emily's true feelings are revealed through a manuscript which Noami finds in her parcel:

The exact moment when I first felt the stirrings of identification with this country occurred when I was
twelve years old, memorizing a Canto of ‘The Lay of the Last Minstrel’.

So many times after that, I repeated the lines: sadly, desperately and bitterly. But at first I was proud, knowing that I belonged.

This is my own, my native land.

Then as I grew older and joined the Nisei group, taking a leading part in the struggle for liberty, I waved those lines around like a banner in the wind:

This is my own, my native land.

When war struck this country, when neither pride nor belligerence nor grief had availed us anything, when we were uprooted, and scattered to the four winds, I clung desperately to those immortal lines.

This is my own, my native land.

Later still, after our former homes had been sold over our vigorous protests, after having been re-registered, finger printed, card-indexed, roped and restricted, cry out the question:

Is this my own, my native land?

The answer cannot be changed. Yes. It is. For better or worse. I am Canadian. (39-40)

A racist policy was seen to govern every action of the Canadian Government. The details in the diary reveal how the
Japanese-Canadians were made to suffer. Aunt Emily quotes a statement of a local paper which approved of the government regulation that no Japanese female be allowed into the men's section at Hastings Park, for ‘that would prevent’ the further propagation of the species” (98). They were referred to as “a stench in the nostrils of the people of the Canada” (118).

Linking the family's relocation to Victor Turner's concept of liminality, Chua Cheng observes that Noami falls from a settled place in a structured society and becomes, in Turner's words, “temporarily liminal and spatially marginal... stripped of status... i.e., removed from social structure” (100). As Chua recognizes, however, unlike Turner's concept of liminality, this spatial move will not result in an eventual reintegration with the wider community of Canadian citizens. For the government they were a “lower order of people” (87), whom they damn for being inassimilable and next moment fear that they will assimilate.

Towns in the interior barred entry to the Japanese - Canadians: fishing boats, cars, cameras, even a toy camera belonging to Noami's brother Stephen are confiscated. A young Nisei boy carrying his tiffin box to school, was accused of being a spy. The media is also against them and all sorts of stories against them are printed. Japanese-Canadian families are relocated and broken. Noami's paternal grandparents are taken to prison where both of them die. “Men, women and children outside Vancouver, from the 'protected area' - a hundred mile strip along the coast - were herded into the grounds and kept there like animals until they
were shipped off to road – work camps and concentration camps in the interior of the province" (77).

The beautiful houses of these people are taken over, their carefully tended miniature gardens are ruined. Noami refers to her community as follows:

We are the silences that speak from stone. We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication, a trainload of eyes covered with mud and spittle. [...] We are those pioneers who cleared the bush and the forest with our hands, the gardeners tending and attending the soil with our tenderness, the fishermen who are flung from the sea to flounder in the dust of the prairies.

We are the Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei, the Japanese-Canadians. We disappear into the future undemanding as dew. (111-112)

*Obasan* presents movements from the civilized and reassuring space of a “large and beautiful house” (50) to natural and wild spaces, an “overgrown tangle of weeds and wines” (122). The abandoned mining town of Slocan to which the family is first relocated is a marginalised space that marks the resilience of a community while functioning in critical relation to the racist and fragmented national space. It is both a prison and a sanctuary. Noami remembers Slocan as a home in the process of construction. Here the fragmented community attempts to rebuild the place
according to their own traditions. The families become, as it were, a new set of pioneers taming, civilizing and settling down. These men and women give a new identity to the town which is Japanese and familiar to their culture. Uncle builds a Japanese garden. Uncle and Stephen place a union Jack flag in their garden. In their kitchen they have mugs with figures of King George and Queen Elizabeth. They remain loyal to Canada. When the King dies Obasan mourns his death. Soon communal baths, educational facilities spring up in Japanese traditions. In Slocan Noami meets Rough Lock Bill who saves her from drowning. He also narrates a tale of a marginalised community and later its removal.

The family is then forced to relocate in Alberta. In Alberta the climatic conditions are quite adverse. All have to work in sugar beet fields. While sifting through Emily’s papers Noami comes across an article describing the situation of deported field workers, where Aunt Emily has kept an index card with the words “Facts about evacuees in Alberta” (193). The article praises the Japanese Canadian workers as they are considered responsible for increase in production figures for Alberta’s sugar beet fields. However Noami’s own memories do not correspond with this side of the article. Noami gradually takes over Aunt Emily’s narration. Her first reaction after reading this article is:

Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep. (194)
Noami and her family feel suffocated. For her “the clouds are the shape of our new prison walls-untouchable, impersonal, random” (196). Each and every member of the family is supposed to work in the fields: ‘‘The whole field is an oven and there’s not a tree within walking distance.[...] the eyes are lidded against the dust and the air cracks the skin, the lips crack, Stephen’s flutes crack and there is no energy to sing any more anyway” (196). Noami does not want to remember the details of Alberta. In an imaginary conversation. She narrates her plight to Aunt Emily:

Aunt Emily are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn’t enough, is it? It’s your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth for lining of my walls, but bring back the anesthetist turn on the ether, clamp down the gas mask, bring on the chloroform, when will this operation be over, Aunt Em? (194).

As Mason Harris remarks:

For Emily remembering means re-establishing the facts of history: for Noami it forces the reliving of a damaged development – an exploration of the self in an area beyond Emily’s experience and also beyond the limitations of her abstract, polemical discourse. (44)

Even after three years of rigorous labour the government is not ready to bring them back to the city. And they are then
relocated to Granton. The whole family works in a beet farm. The house is a hovel at the edge of the farm and they have to endure the harsh winters and the torrid summers of the region. They experience racism in Granton. Noami says: “thistles, it seems to me, are typical of life in Granton school. From nowhere the sharp stabs come, attacking me for no reason at all. They come at unexpecting times, in passing remarks, in glances, in jokes” (102). Noami contemplates the past and says:

I can remember since Aunt Emily insists that I must and release the flood gates one by one. I can cry for the flutes that have cracked in the dryness and cry for the people who no longer sing. I can cry for Obasan who has turned to stone. But what then? Uncle does not rise up and return to his boats. Dead bones do not take on flesh. (198)

Kogawa emphasizes how language can disguise any crime. Aunt Emily says:

A lot of academic talk just immobilizes the oppressed and maintains oppressors in their positions of power.

(35)

Language is a powerful medium, but it operates differently for those in power and the powerless. In Obasan “words spoken by the powerless have no impact; they only tantalize as ‘prayers disappear in space’, Language issued by the powerful, however, can constitute a form of speech act, commanding performance” (Cheung
128). The government uses words like ‘interior Housing Projects’ for prisons.

Noami finds a letter in the parcel which is from a person B. Good. It is a plain letter. Noami says that the true contents of the letter should have been:

...Be good, my undesirable, my illegitimate children, be obedient, be servile... (37)

It appears that the name B Good is a kind of order to the Japanese-Canadians that the only option left to them is to cooperate with the government that confiscates all their property. Noami does not want to remember all this and at times feels very disturbed, as she says:

And I am tired, I suppose, because I want to get away from all this. From the past, from 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)

This above quotation reveals Noami's condition who is tired of rafting in her past and present. She thinks her identity to be a 'heavy identity' because her present has the weight of her dark past. Noami's life is as if partly in the clutches of that past which
is inexplicable and monstrous. Yet she cannot reject its hold on her life. Her life is torn between Japanese values of endurance and English questioning. She says she is like a hamster in a tube in a cage that has not been cleaned for months. She feels like a hamster whose life is governed by others. Noami at times is confused when she starts to remember her past:

I AM SOMETIMES NOT CERTAIN WHETHER IT IS A CLUTTERED ATTIC in which I sit, a waiting room, a tunnel, a train, there is no beginning and no end to the forest, or the dust storm, no edge from which to know where the clearing begins. Here, in this familiar density, beneath this cloak, within this carapace, is the longing within the darkness. (Ill)

The fragments of the past which remain for Noami are elusive, even unfamiliar to her adult self: she is groping through a history which scarcely seems her own. Though Emily’s diary describes events which Noami too experienced, the act of remembering makes all the details new to her:

I feel like a burglar as I read, breaking into a private house only to discover it’s my house filled with corners and rooms I’ve never seen. (95)

When Noami and her family were deracinated she was only five years old. She could not understand the reason why they were forced out of their homes and why her parents had left her, as Obasan and Uncle did not answer her questions. As a small child
she began to think in terms of her childhood stories. She continues this pattern of thinking even after growing up. Rufus Cook says that in her release from her selfhood, "it is her dreams and her 'involuntary or spontaneous recollection [...] that play the decisive role'" (84). It is through her dreams and her link which she forms in childhood stories that her subconscious mind is revealed. Noami's inability to relate linguistically to other people is revealed through her dreams. As she says, "There is no language. Everything is accepted" (28).

Noami first dreams of a man and a woman who work in the forest. She also follows them. This dream reminds her of Alberta where Noami and her family were relocated for the second time. In Alberta they were subjected to rigorous labour and this has left a deep imprint on Noami's mind. The dream now changes. She now dreams of her Uncle:

The dream changes now and Uncle stands in the depth of the forest. He bows a deep ceremonial bow. In his mouth is a red rose with an endless stem. He turns around slowly in a flower dance, a ritual of the dead. Behind him, someone – I do not know who – is straining to speak, but rapidly, softly a cloud overtakes everything. Is it the British officer with his pruning shears disappearing to the left? He is wearing an army uniform. (30)

In the dream the endless stem of the red rose in Uncle's mouth suggests a mystery which is deep within and is yet to be explored.
Someone standing behind Uncle, is her mother who wants to speak something, to tell Noami the reason of her absence. Then Noami thinks that may be a British officer is standing there. It suggests that the Canadian authorities have separated them, and Noami is troubled by this.

In another dream she sees Japanese women in captivity of soldiers. The women are using gestures to lure the soldiers. But the soldiers are desperate to kill. They shoot them: “The soldiers could not be won. Dread and deathly loathing cut through the women” (62).

After this dream Noami begins to think of Old Gower the abuse she suffered at the hands of Old Gower and the persecution she and her family endured at the hands of Canadians. The guns of the dream represent her tormentors’ potential to cause harm. Noami thinks of Old Gower in terms of childhood stories:

I am Snow White in the forest, unable to run. He is the forest full of eyes and arms. He is the tree root that trips Snow White. He is the lightening flashing through the dark sky. (64)

According to Marilyn Rose: “The abuse of Japanese Canadians by white Canada is a kind of sociopathic rape in response to which victims can only reel in silent shame” (222).

Old Gower like Canadian authorities exploits them and expects them to keep quiet. Noami is ashamed to tell about this incident to her mother. She is always ashamed of this. This feeling
manifests itself in her dream where she visualises “My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other” (65).

Noami is hospitalised in Slocan where she dreams “of a baby [who] has fried-egg eyes and his excrement is soft and yellow as corn mush. His head is covered with an oatmeal scab, under which his scalp is a wet wound. The doctor in the dream is angry and British” (158). In her dreams people who are inflicting pain are British.

The colour symbolism also plays a vital role in Noami’s remembering. It lends an unforgettable significance to a childhood scene that recurrently comes back in her memory. Noami remembers a childhood experience. Once she was all alone in the house. Her parents had brought yellow chicks. There was also a hen in the cage. A bar separated the hen from the chicks. Noami lifted the bar thinking that the hen will fondle the chicks. Contrary to what Noami had expected, the hen started pecking on the chicks and wounded them. Noami associates yellow colour with the victim and white with the victimizer. In the context of the Canadian scenario white colour is associated with the native Canadians and yellow with the “visible minorities”.

The scene of the white hen pecking to death the tiny yellow chicks has a counterpart in an episode of great cruelty when Noami and her brother Stephen watch six Japanese boys inflicting prolonged torture and finally death on a white hen. They seem determined “to make it suffer” (169), an unconscious form of
revenge on the Canadian authorities that fills the narrator with repulsion.

Noami’s brother Stephen also adopts this unconscious form of revenge and deviates from the family behaviour who quietly follow the orders of the Canadian authorities, as he is a victim of more lucid racism. When they reach Slocan, where they are first relocated; as though to vent his anger at being punished for no reason Stephen kills butterflies with his crutch: “Within moments the ground and grasses are quivering with maimed and dismembered butterflies” (142).

In order to avoid the label of ‘other’ Stephen adopts the English way of life. He rejects everything Japanese and follows English mannerisms, language and food. As Noami recalls, when they go to school Stephen wants to eat English food:

Stephen is scowling as Obasan returns and offers him a rice ball. ‘Not that kind of food’, he says. Stephen, half in and half out of his shell, is Humpty Dumpty – cracked and surly and unable to move. (115)

Stephen rejects everything Japanese. He wants to escape from his surroundings. He scolds Obasan for her Japanese way of life. This is because he was a victim of brutal racism when he was in school: “One day he comes home from school, his glasses broken, black tear stains on his face” (70). He is half in and half out of the Japanese ways. Amidst this chaos he develops a limp, which
represents the limp of racism which the Japanese-Canadians have suffered. He seeks refuge in music.

For both Noami and Stephen this is a big riddle that “We are both the enemy and not the enemy” (70). When Noami and her family are relocated to Slocan, they live in houses which originally belonged to white Canadians.

Noami thinks in terms of the story of Goldilocks. First she thinks herself to be a Baby bear, a Japanese who is troubled by Goldilocks, Canadians. But then she says she is a Goldilock, a Canadian.

Yellow, as associated with the visible minorities, is once again revealed when at Christmas Stephen is given a gift of “The yellow Peril”, a game “made in Canada”, a game about war with picture of the map of Japan with the following words: “The game that shows how a few brave defenders can withstand a very great number of enemies” (152). Noami wants to be white; she says “Yellow is to be chicken. I am not yellow” (165). When Aunt Emily tells Noami that people were deported to the interior, she once again thinks in terms of the chicken imagery:

There’s something called an order-in-council that sails like a giant hawk across a chicken yard, and after the first shock there’s a flapping squawking lunge for safety. One swoop and the first thousand are on ships, sailing for disaster. I can remember the chickens in Slocan, their necks and tiny heads thrust low, diving
for shelter, one time that a hawk came circling down. (189)

This image of chickens and danger is taken up in various ways in the novel it refers to the problem of identities for the Japanese-Canadians. For Noami the Japanese-Canadians are tiny chicks and the authorities are hawks who pounce on the chicks.

Another story which has left a deep imprint on Noami's mind is the story of Momotaro. When Noami was young her mother used to narrate this story to her. Momotaro is a Japanese story of endurance. An aged couple is blessed with a child who comes out of a peach. When Momotaro grows up, he travels to a neighbouring island to fight bandits, he wins the battle and brings honour.

Aunt Emily is like Momotaro who fights for the Canadian government's redress for the Japanese-Canadians. Her entire life is a continuous struggle. In the face of growing bewilderment and distress, Aunt Emily “roamed the landscape like an aircraft in a fog looking for a place to land – a safe and sane strip of justice and reason. Not seeing these, she did not crash into the oblivion of either bitterness of futility but remained air borne” (79). Whereas Emily fights for justice, Obasan is greatful for life. “Agritai Gratitude only”(50). After years of maltreatment, the Isseis (first generation immigrants) still maintain a generous mind because of their Japanese values; Uncle says: “This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude” (50). Obasan holds fast to her ethnic identity and Japanese cultural and linguistic heritage: “Obasan [...] does not
come from this clamorous climate. She does not dance to the multicultural piper’s tune or respond to the racist’s slur” (226).

It is through the letters of their mother which are in Aunt Emily’s folder and which are read by Nakayama Sensei, a Japanese priest, that both Noami and Stephen get to know about their mother’s death in Nagasaki. Before the final unraveling Noami dreams of her mother:

I was having a nightmare just now. Something about stairs. Ah yes, and a courtyard. That’s it. Stairs leading into a courtyard and the place of the dead. It wasn’t at all a ‘fine and private place’; that home beyond the grave. They were all there — my parents, the grandparents, and Obasan as well, small as a child. She was intent on being near me at the top of the stairs. And of course, there were soldiers. Always, I dream of soldiers eager for murder, their weapons ready. We die again and again. In my dreams, we are never safe enough.

In the courtyard, a flower ceremony was under way, like the one in my dream yesterday morning. Mother stood in the centre. In her mouth she held a knotted string stem, like the twine and string of Obasan’s ball which she keeps in the pantry. From the stem hung a rose, red as a heart. I moved towards her from the top of the stairs, a cloud falling to earth, heavy and full of rain. (227)
Through the dream it is revealed that Noami longs for her family. Most of her family members are now dead, so she thinks that though they were not allowed to live together it is possible that they may be united after death. Soldiers are recurrent in Noami’s dreams which suggest the presence of Canadian authorities in their lives. She says, “we die again and again” (227), which suggests that the Japanese Canadians trust the Canadian government fully but they are betrayed again and again, as even after four years of the Second World War they are not permitted to come back to the mainland.

In her mother’s mouth there is a knotted stem like the one Obasan had used to tie Aunt Emily’s papers. This links both the women and suggests that the reason of mother’s absence will be unraveled with the help of Obasan’s papers which she has given to Noami. She thinks of her dream, she remembers that once she came across two ideographs for the word love:

The first contained the root words ‘heart’ and ‘hand’ and ‘action’ — love as hands and heart in action together. The other ideograph, for ‘passionate love’, was formed of ‘heart’, ‘to tell’ and ‘a long thread’. (228)

The first explanation applies to Obasan who follows her heart and serves others. The second definition signifies Aunt Emily, a vocal member of the community who wants to acquaint the present generation with the atrocities committed by the Canadian government against their community.
In one of her dreams she visualizes her mother interrogated by the Grand Inquisitor. Noami says:

To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone, he must first become silent. Only when he enters her abandonment, will he be released from his own. What the Grand Inquisitor has never learned is that avenues of speech are the avenues of silence. (228)

Like Joseph Campbell's hero in his struggle with the threshold guardian, Noami will have to leave her ego and listen to the absent voice. Aunt Emily tells Noami that it was her mother's wish to maintain silence, to conceal her death's secret from her children. Aunt Emily reveals:

A Canadian maple tree grows there where your name stands. The tree utters its scarlet voice in the air. Prayers bleeding. Its rustling leaves are fingers scratching an empty sky. (241)

A Canadian maple tree at the mother's grave suggests her intimate ties with Canada. The tree represents the mother who was firmly rooted in Canada, who provided security to her children. Noami laments the loss of her mother:

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. Silent Mother, lost in the abandoning, you do not share the horror. At first, stumbling and unaware of pain, you open your eyes in the red mist, and sheltering a dead child, you flee through the flames. Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there? (242)

Noami in her mind relates her plight to her mother by assuming that the mother was also with them in the adverse circumstances. She says that she was present at Nagasaki with her mother when the nuclear bomb was dropped. She in a way links their different but common experiences, as in both the cases it is due to the higher authorities that common people suffered. They had no right on their lives as the government become architects not only of the nations but also of the lives of people who lived there.

Noami longs for her mother's love and asserts:

Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences.
Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction. (243)

When Noami gets to know about the reality of her mother she feels “as if I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as have done all my life” (240). Noami realises that her mother's silence was a message of her love, the rift she has always felt in her body is somewhat healed. She says that she will not remain lost in her silences.

In the end Noami goes to the coulee. As Lynn Magnusson notes, at the end of the novel Noami puts on Emily's coat to drive to the coulee that she visited each year with her Uncle. She
understands that annual visits were an act of mourning for her mother and all the Japanese Canadians:

Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight, to the place where the colours all meet — red, and yellow and blue. We have turned and returned to your arms as you turn to earth and form the forest floor. Tonight we picked berries with the help of your sighted hands. Tonight we read the forest braille. See how our stained fingers have read the seasons, and how our serving hands serve you still.

(246)

Mourning represents an act of claiming space in the sense that it transforms private pilgrimage into a shared ritual of remembering. According to Teruyo Ueki:

Pilgrimages to one’s family graves are a common rite observed among the Japanese at the time of obon in summer when the moon becomes full. Uncle Isamu’s annual visit to the prairie under the moonlight meant such a pilgrimage — a tribute to the memory of the dead sleeping underneath the stone. (14)

With this act the Issei (first generation immigrants), the Nisei (second generation immigrants) and Sansei (third generation immigrants) are connected in an act of communion. Through unburdening of tragic memories, Noami affirms her belonging to a painful and fragmented history from which she previously felt
estranged. Noami visualises her mother standing in Vancouver and she herself clinging to her: “Your leg is a tree trunk and I am branch, vine, butterfly. I am joined to your limbs by right of birth, child of your flesh, leaf of your bough” (242-43). Noami dreams of a small child [...] with a wound on her knee. The wound on her knee is on the back of her skull, large and moist. A double wound. The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell. I apply a thick bandage but nothing can soak up the seepage. I beg that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs may learn to dance. (243)

Noami thinks of the wound which old Gower inflicted on her due to which she always felt guilt in her and was always traumitised to form any kind of relationship with any male. And the other wound is caused by the Canadian Government who have separated her loved ones from her. She tries to comfort herself but there is no relief. She longs for peace and serenity.

In the end Noami gains strength of character and begins to find herself and her voice. As a child, Noami refrains from singing the national anthem in Slocan school which she hates to attend. She incorporates excerpts from the anthem to address her anger towards the inhospitable people of Canada:

Where do any of us come from in this cold country? Oh Canada, whether it is admitted or not, we come from you, we come from you. From the same soil, the slugs
and slime and bogs and twigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and sloughs, unintended and spindly. We erupt in the valleys and mountainsides, in small towns and back alleys, sprouting upside-down on the prairies, our hair wild as spiders’ legs, our feet rooted nowhere. We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting. Where do we come from, Obasan? We come from skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth. We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. We come from Canada, this land that is like every land, filled with the wise, the fearful, the compassionate, the corrupt. (226)

This passage reveals scepticism about the official multiculturalism which was so strongly emphasised by the government under Prime Minister Trudeau. Obasan reminds Canada in 1981 that justice has still not been done to the Japanese-Canadians, that racism persists. Noami laments the fact that Canada rejects their assimilation and treats them as foreigners.

Noami begins to hear the absent voice of her mother but she still longs for her presence:

What ghostly whisperings I feel in the air as I hold the card. ‘Kodomo no tame – for the sake of the children – gaman shi masho – let us endure’. The voices pour
down like rain but in middle of the downpour I still feel thirst. Somewhere between speech and hearing is a transmutation of sound. (245)

According to Karen S. McPherson:

Noami’s attendance is a form of memory work, a mode of witnessing across time and space that allows the absences and silences of the past to speak to and through her. [...] Noami’s memory gives voice and meaning to that inarticulate silence [which the mother had held for the sake of her children]. (94)

The stone of silence is changed into the manna of speech. The scene and the novel affirm that both silence and speech are indispensable for life. The ending of the novel, as Coral Ann Howells observes, is a process of the protagonist’s transformation: “Noami has rehabilitated herself as a speaking subject and the story ends on a fragile promise of the future” (194).

The novel ends with an excerpt from the order-in-council and blends the personal and political, suggesting that the very act of reconnecting to shared history affirms a space for the Japanese-Canadians on the terrain of national discourse from which they had been violently excluded. As Donald C. Geollricht observes, the novel constitutes the breaking of silence, and through the discursive power of language, enacts a discovery of self not only for Noami or Kogawa, but for Canada which must also come to terms with its heterogeneous identity (297). Kogawa implies an
ideal vision of Canada where all heterogeneous groups live peacefully. As Heather Zwicker remarks, the ending of the novel "foregrounds history the process of constructing history, the process of coming to hear its silences as well as its words" (qtd in Vautier 193).

In the end Noami wears Aunt Emily's coat and goes to visit the coulee. "By the time I reach the coulee, the sky has changed from a steel grey to a faint teal blue" (246). The colour of the sky changes from grey as some dark aspects of Noami's past are unveiled. Noami's wearing of Aunt Emily in a way suggests that from a silent being now she will finally enter the realm of speech.

In an image of beauty Kogawa completes the Revelation mentioned in the epigraph:

> Above the trees, the moon is a pure of white stone. The reflection is rippling in the river – water and stone dancing. It's a quiet ballet, soundless as breath. (247)

In an article on the *Literature of Exile*, Oscar Campones argues that in a 'classic scene of exilic writing' the exile returns to his or her homeland and takes the first glimpse of home after an absence of many years. In the novel the protagonist Noami metaphorically returns to her sense of belonging to Canada as a Japanese-Canadian, a kind of homecoming after an extended passivity of mind following what was a kind of exile.

In *Obasan* the retrieval is the legitimization of Emily's package and Noami's claim on memories. Noami is caught in a
limbo of Japanese Canadian heritage, where she is silent and also has an insatiable need for knowledge. The novel testifies the need to remember one's past. Through Obasan Kogawa has made the silence speak. Though the character Obasan maintains silence, Kogawa's novel eloquently reveals the plight of Japanese-Canadians in the process of the protagonist Noami's struggle to make sense of different traumatic and disturbing experiences, which begin to fall into place as she understands the mystery surrounding the missing mother and rises above her unhappy memories of deracination towards wholeness of identity.
References


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