PUTTING WORDS TO SILENCE:
AN EXAMINATION OF JOY KOGAWA’S OBI SAN

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PROFESSOR D. STOUCK
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Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan*, a fictionalized account of Canada’s treatment of its Japanese citizens during the nineteen-forties, can be seen in a larger context as a hermeneutic narrative of the internecine madness of victims and victimizers; of the misconstructions and compulsions a rationalizing intellect uses in committing his/her offence, the psychological mechanism the victim employs in confronting these messy facts in dealing with the tragedy, and how together they both sustain the mutual pretense that prolongs any meaningful resolution. Kogawa seems to be grasping throughout the novel to capture in some communicable experience some human truth of the irrational animus—or willful deceit and hypocrisy—that informs social and racial intolerance and allows these injustices to continue. In the most general terms, the purpose of this paper then is to explore in further detail, in Kogawa’s own metaphors, what *Obasan* provides to our understanding of cruelty.

Kogawa relays a Canadianized version of the classic Japanese tale of Momotaro, a story of the wonder and delight of being a child. There is, of course, the obvious implication that this is a reference to Naomi and/or Stephen. But Arnold Davidson tells us that Momotaro, the child that ripens from a peach, is also a Japanese folklore of a legendary hero representing Japan who drove out unwanted foreigners and took their treasure (41). When cast in this new light the Canadian Momotaro child takes on sinister and perverse overtones. This interpretation does seem apt. The history of Canada during the time of the Japanese internment and dispersal is a tale of a civilized, democratic, Christian nation that harbored myths of itself in its adolescence with pretensions of child-like innocence. Fed on such stories there sank deep into the national folklore a sense of righteous infallibility. The “concept that a child could do wrong did not seem to exist. There was no need for crying.” (56).

Kogawa questions the creed and conscience of a country that treated people as if they were merely variables in the government’s miscalculated equation of national security, to be placed as the politicians pleased. We should rightfully feel a sense of shame and dishonor that the country’s once cherished ideals had so woefully gone awry as when the peach tree gives Naomi nightmares; it menacingly “sways and swings around like a giant octopus trying to break in” (80). It behooves us as a nation to remember the past and to look with honesty and an unclouded hindsight at where the nation comes from and what we hope to become. As Kogawa repeatedly reminds us, Canada’s high hopes as a nation are tied inextricably with how it deals with its dishonorable past.

In its defense, the Canadian government has pleaded necessity but in truth it had pursued excess all along. Naomi’s neighbor, Old Man Gower, uses the pretense of concern for Naomi’s health—to fix the scratch on her knee—in disrobing her. But “the scratch is hardly visible,” we’re told, “and does not hurt.” His charity is only cruelty in disguise. Likewise, Mackenzie King, the person Old Man Gower supposedly represents, was also purporting to be just acting on behalf of the Japanese’s own interests in seeing that they weren’t victimized by other voters by relieving them of their voting rights. The government’s selfish and racist instincts became social virtues. The earlier claims of protecting national security are likewise also shown to be merely pretexts for selfish greed and racist meanness. In the trauma of childhood abuse, the darkened theater of Naomi’s
innocent mind is suddenly lit by a lightning flash of a partial understanding. Her “knowing” is a child’s awareness of being in a world where one could be so personally and shamefully violated. She does feel that she’s been harmed in some way but she’s uncertain of exactly how. She thinks to herself, “If Stephen comes he will see my shame. He will know what I feel and the knowing will flood the landscape” (64). The hurt feelings are too shameful to admit openly. It’s an intensely personal wound.

But Naomi also acknowledges her complicity in this sin by admitting her receptiveness to Mr. Gower’s touch—“His hands were frightening and pleasurable” (65). So, how are we to account for these seemingly incompatible notions? To overcome her feelings of venerability and helplessness Naomi must at some level of her subjective experience identify with and psychologically associate herself with her assailant in the commission of his malfeasance. Naomi also seems to shoulder a burden of guilt for having somehow been found deserving of such a punishment and for somehow personally being at fault and culpable for what she endures. As Kelman elucidates, in Obasan “injustice provokes more guilt in its victims than in its perpetrators. Being punished makes innocent people feel ashamed.”

Mr. Gower betrays the trust she places in adults and so grievously harms the simple trust and faith of a child. Naomi remains arrested in this world of a five-year-old and as a symbol of that trespass, menace, and perfidy Mr. Gower continues to victimize her. “Does Old Man Gower still walk through the hedges between our houses in Vancouver, in Slocan, in Granton and Cecil?” she asks (62).

Naomi consciously attempts to excise her mind of these unpleasant facts, much like the nation at the time. But the past lingers in branded memories like the “indescribable items in the dark recesses of the fridge that never see the light of day” (45). Or, to use another metaphor, she thinks it best to avoid any further prodding of an already poorly healing wound. But the harm that results from the silence—or in ignoring that wound—is deeper and longer lasting.

This still raw wound flares up regularly in the penetrating dreams that trouble her consciousness. Naomi lives as much in the oniric space of these dreams as in the half-awake twilight sleep of her consciousness. Her victimization is an on-going invasion; the dream sequences occupy themselves in an illusion of timelessness. “Like threads of old spider webs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for [her] to submit, or depart” (26). While she may wish to deny it to herself, Naomi is still thoroughly ensnarled in this skein of the past.

In one particular dream an enigmatic figure bearing a striking resemblance to Obasan, in collaboration with a British martinet, “harvests the forest’s debris” (28). By residing in her imperturbable silence Obasan unwittingly makes common cause with the forgetful and heedless nation’s interest of delaying justice indefinitely. Obasan, can thus be seen as a motif of the shifting and changing Japanese group consciousness. She’s now a closed-off and taciturn wraith of a creature surrounded by the debris of her shattered life. This refuse she’s buried alive in also reflects her cluttered mind that’s brooding over and searching for her own private peace and reconciliation with the past. She relegates to the dusty attic the
unpleasant memories of her history, much like her morally deaf country; never to speak of them openly.

Naomi and Stephen are fed on this silence, the indigestible stone bread that makes up their emotional sustenance, and each learns to deal with the affective diet in her and his own way. The irony is that this dearth of open communication on the unpleasant issue of their persecution—the evasions, sanitized versions of events, and outright withholding or ignoring of the facts—are all well-meaning, being guided as they are by the parental feelings of concern for the children’s well-being and by their honoring the wishes of the deceased mother. But more importantly, the forced silence on the subject of their past is, I believe, really to lend credence to the mutual pretense of normalcy. Uncle Sam and Obasan may also be putting on this bold front so that the children may draw their own personal strength from it. Finally, there also seems to be a cultural imperative to set an example of restraint before one’s children. Momotaro’s guardians don’t allow a show of strong emotions to burst forth, “there are no tears and no touch,” and they’re careful not to “weight his pack with their sorrow” (56). The grandparents of the story must remain stalwart and controlled for the sake of their child. There’s also a sense that one ought always to behave in a proper and prescribed manner. This means supposedly for Sam to honor the wishes of the deceased and to not unduly burden and torment others with ugly facts; and for Naomi to observe a polite silence to show respect before her uncle’s reticence. As well, there’s also a sense in the Japanese culture to bravely endure hardship and sorrow. People, Naomi believes, “are made strong and excellent when they go through life’s difficulties” (131). Gradually, this unquestioned deception and self-denial hardens into permanence.

As a remedy this silence is worse than the disease. In an echoing refrain throughout the novel, these sorts of seemingly good intentions are led astray to grotesque distortions and are exposed as being specious, harmful, and misguided. This point is again illustrated by the white-haired girl who asks Naomi to retrieve her cat from the outhouse, to supposedly right some perceived wrong. Concealing the fate of Naomi’s mother, done out of a purported parental concern for her own well-being, in the end does more harm than good: “The “wound on [Naomi’s] knee is on the back of her skull, large and moist” (243). In other words, Kogawa sees the silence as being an anodyne, just “aspirins to fight [Naomi’s] headaches,” a momentary assuagement that soothes but does nothing for the gaping wound that remains (158). It seems we’re to understand that it’s wrong for Sam and Obasan to assume that this deliberate deceit is anything other than an obstacle to healing. This nagging unanswered question keeps Naomi caught in the web of the past: “the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return?” (56). Naomi’s guardians leave her awaiting a day they fully well know will never arrive. They thereby deny her the salutary and therapeutic effect of a healthy grieving, a sense of resolution, and catharsis that only honesty finally allows. Here is again shown a wide gulf between the intent and the attendant result.

Naomi’s mind seems to accept other justifications that anesthetize and induce a psychic numbing and closing-off. Even her recognition of the very issues lapses and fogs her mind. When Naomi is confronted by her Aunt Emily’s arguments she merely concedes something
about the human race in general or man in the abstract. For she says, “Fears of the
collective can only be calmed by the sacrifice of a minority. Isn’t that the way it’s always
been?” (35). Her personal injustice merely becomes a matter of what “we” (199) as a species
do to each other and not as what has been done to familiar individuals, particular persons,
or to her singular self. By depending on such appeals to abstract principles she then needn’t
confront the real tragedy of flesh and blood. It’s only natural to feel indifferent about pure
abstractions. “The words are not made flesh,” she says (189). To her, Aunt Emily is simply
pursuing an academic exercise in some formal concept of justice. As such, this “justice”
cannot alter the hard facts of her predicament. Naomi doesn’t believe her “contentment”
(42) lies in any official acknowledgment but rather in her own private consolation. It’s only
after the reading of the letter from Nagasaki, when the policies of the Canadian government
become directly applicable to an idiosyncratic and beloved family member, does the
tragedy become real. This irreparable loss is beyond what any positive attitude can undo.

It’s a strange quirk of the complex and many-sided dimension of human experience
that the same tragedy that can galvanize one person, like Aunt Emily, can paralyze another.
Similarly, Naomi seems to find comfort in her cultural heritage away from a hostile world
while Stephen can find in it only acute embarrassment. He tells his sister that in a
nightmare he has, a “metallic insect...[webbed] a grid of iron bars over him,” but he
“escaped the web by turning the bars into a xylophone” (220). He thus frees himself of the
ignominy and shame of the past. He disassociates himself from the stigma of his Japanese
heritage by emulating and by trying to become a part of the larger outside “Canadian”
society in the hope of being accepted and tolerated. He’s cowering in the hay as in “The
Book of Golden Deeds” Naomi tells of where the children’s salvation meant being unseen
and unheard (72). Kogawa also compares Stephen’s response to a hollow shell he encases
himself in, like an egg or a ball. Before eschewing it altogether, Stephen carries his Japanese
culture around him like a bum leg and a crutch. Like Naomi, he displays a peculiar
mindlessness he seems to feel necessary to forget and divest himself of the past. Both
siblings also seem to accomplish a separation of perception from rationalization, of
knowledge from understanding, and of feelings from experience. They’re an interesting
study in the levels of contradiction the human mind can sustain. Conversely, there may
perhaps be a subconscious elision of what they believe is best forgotten. Naomi seems to
know more than she wants to admit to herself or she may simply be forgetting the
inconsistencies in her thinking.

In seeking anonymity, in shunning his cultural heritage, and in displaying a shy
eagerness to be accepted, Stephen resembles the native children that are mentioned. In fact,
Kogawa makes numerous associations of the Japanese’s plight with the colonial treatment
of Canada’s aboriginal populations. For example, Uncle Sam is presented as Sitting Bull,
the leader of a once-proud and confident people who’s now left on a reservation, defeated,
and prostrated (2). Sam is further described as a kind of living museum piece, a fragment of
a lost historic past. Naomi’s family is instructive in showing how deleteriously their
conquerors’ belittling attitude and forced attempts at assimilation affect these oppressed
people’s pride and wounds the collective psyche. Some, like Stephen, internalize this
message of their inherent ethnic inferiority in the larger society’s value system. His original
culture, his mother tongue, former heritage, and way of life become perverted and twisted into a handicap.

Perhaps, Rough Lock Bill is meant to offer a counter to this degrading and patronizing attitude toward an alternative cultural identity. The name Rough Lock itself suggests a curl of hair that doesn’t easily submit to restyling and applied to the man it suggests an unbending, proud, and recalcitrant individual. He’s further accorded a certain moral authority by his association with the King bird that gouges out any liar’s tongue. The tale he tells recalls the time of his ancestors—possibly the original immigrants to Canada—and may extend back many tens of thousands of years. Davidson believes that Kogawa thereby implicitly questions the rectitude of a hegemonically imposed Canadian government’s right to exercise an exclusionary definition of citizenship when it even denies full citizenship status to the land’s original occupants (Davidson 60). Afterall, who could have a stronger claim to Canada as their “Home and Native Land” than the First Nations’ people?

Unlike Rough Lock’s hair, the tangled and knotted loyalties of Naomi’s unruly and “unpatriotic” thoughts are symbolically straightened out, put in line, and set aright with the forceful combing that scrapes her skull. With the repetitive conditioning and insistent indoctrination—represented by the symbolic combing and later by the neurotically repetitive beet farming routines—the Japanese are henpecked into obedience; inured to their place in the caste system; inculcated to feel that any rights they may have are merely licenses held at the state’s pleasure and revocable without notice; made to believe that to be associated with being Japanese is a degrading affair and akin to second-class status; cowed into keeping their heads reverentially low to avoid further offending racist sensibilities; are made to be obsessively devoted to living down some sense of shame; and convinced that it’s disloyal to demur to any indignity or torment requested of them by their government.

Such is the fatal attraction of a victim’s irrational justifications. It can overwhelm even a person of good will to regard the most outrageous and untenable notions as facts. Stephen’s maiming and the killing of the butterflies is presented as the result of a child’s simple mistake and of a wishful thinking that he’s doing something constructive. But this doesn’t mitigate his actions. He’s an apparition of death, a ghoulish grim reaper “swinging his crutch like a scythe” (123). He chooses to see things in his own irrational way in order to satisfy his preconceptions, “They’re bad,” he says, “They eat holes in your clothes” (123) He’s thus thoroughly convinced of their vileness and worthlessness. Kogawa seems to be saying that he’s as vulnerable as anyone to the seductive appeal of hubris and false certainties. Also of interest here is how this victimizer conceptually views himself as victim. To his credit though, Stephen does fall short of the strutting and gloating of a supposed superiority that’s evinced by the girls at the public bath when they malign Naomi and her father’s illness.

For the aggressors it always seems that there’s a total alienation between them and their victims. The objects of hate are perceived to be different, something other, something removed, distanced by a few shades, something not fully alive, and something deficient in some important way. There’s an impersonal objectification and ideological estrangement in the language the Occidental population employed that erased or reduced the Japanese’s humanity. They became foreigners (7), the yellow peril (17), the “Japanese race,” (33), Japs
(41), the enemy (70), the “ideal servant” (87), the species (98), “low animal,” (104), “gimpy Jap” (153) and “flat face” (201). This, for Naomi, constitutes a psychological rape: “there is Percy in Slocan, pressing me against the cave wall during hide-and-go-seek...” (61). So, other than giving this short blurb, either Kogawa neglects to mention this assault when Naomi reaches that part of the story or the racial invectives Percy hurls at her and Stephen are what she’s referring to (153).

Thought of as less than human, the Japanese could then be dealt any mistreatment as it would supposedly befit their station in life. Considered a “lower order of people” (87), the government could treat the Japanese as if it were dealing with cows and oxen, as they did at the Livestock Building at Hastings Park. To them, being Japanese carries suggestions of sickness, defect, and second-class status. They were considered “...a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada. ...[they] were therefore relegated to the cesspools” of the ghost towns (118). They’re reduced to a simplified outline into which all persons of Japanese descent were fitted, in the process dehumanized and deprived of individuality or eccentricity. They were all cast as beast-like and yellow-skinned; “Yellow like the yellow pawns in the Yellow Peril game,” (152) a child’s game which the nation’s leaders also enjoyed playing. There’s a value ratio of fifty yellow pawns to three blue or Occidental pawns, a ratio reminiscent of the three-fifths of a person given as the value of a slave in the US Constitution (Article I Section 2). Just as patriarchy engenders the myth of the benevolent ruler of the family, racism seems to uphold the myth of the rightful carriers of culture and refinement. In one of Naomi’s earlier mentioned dreams, a thin and precise British martinet freely prunes Canada’s family tree, discarding its parts as he pleases.

Cruelty is again dispensed in childish levity when Kenji relieves his boredom by making sport of a bug, prodding it with a stick, and leaving it to perish in a whirlpool. Never does Kogawa impute in this instance any specific malign intent. It’s just a mindless thing a child does because he can. The Japanese village in Slocan is described as an overturned ant-hill (119), and Lilliput (141), itself vulnerable and defenseless to a similar government goading. There’s also the obvious parallel with the whirl of terror Naomi soon after finds herself in.

Naomi herself becomes the usurper of this perverse power when she’s witness to the beheading of the chicken in the school yard. She becomes gripped and intoxicated by some strange mixture of revulsion, pity, and fascination. She’s “unable either to move or to avert [her] eyes” (155). She finds she’s captivated by some aesthetic of violence that transforms an ordinary and even banal event into an object of beauty compelling her morbid attention. The animal is reduced to a mechanical toy that dispenses for a one time performance an agonizing death for the children’s viewing pleasure. The chicken is a play-thing for experimenting and inflicting gratuitous violence on just to see what happens. Naomi herself cannot deny that there’s some intrinsic pleasure in inflicting such cruelty free from societal sanction. The struggling and fluttering decapitated chicken is perhaps being compared to the Nagasaki bomb as what appears to be just wasteful destruction and a purely sadistic flourish.

One could with some difficulty plead necessity in justifying the use of the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima, although it’s been compared to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.
But the search for a good rationale for the Americans to have detonated the second bomb at Nagasaki always seems to come up empty. As far as I can gather, the second bomb was deployed just out of sheer curiosity to observe whether a plutonium bomb would work as well as the first uranium bomb dropped only three days prior. The Second World War presented the Americans a limited opportunity to test the efficiency of this plutonium bomb that would otherwise have denied them the human guinea pigs. So, I assume, the Nagasaki bomb was allowed to ravage the bodies of thousands of people purely for the benefit of medical science. But lest one should lose sight of the human tragedy, Kogawa provides explicit details of the violence that leaves only carnage and the mangled ruins of people’s lives. The vestigial remnants of these people devoured in the nuclear inferno are described in what can only be called a pornography of violence. One feels a tinge of guilt in just knowing the details.

In another of Naomi’s dreams, the internment and dispersal policy for her again assumes a rape-like atmosphere to emphasize how the Japanese were completely at the disposal of the criminal power and privilege the Canadian government had over them. In this social construction of power, the Japanese, represented by the bound and naked oriental women, are utterly at the mercy of a group of soldiers. The Japanese could claim nothing as their right and the government flaunted its power over their very lives, taking advantage of their positions of authority to indulge in petty theft. The soldiers—sure of their lofty positions and proudly conscious of their perceived superiority—can act with complete impunity. Kogawa sees the torturers as even taking pleasure in exercising their power over what they calumniate as being insignificant play-things or a lower order of animal. “This was sport. A game to play with animals in the forest. Power” (62).

“The weeds in the garden do not moan when they are plucked from the skin of the earth. Nor do the trees cry out at the fierce combing as they lie uprooted by the roadside” (150). For their tormentors the women are such weeds, wretched bleeding things left uprooted and exposed by the side of the road. For fear of what her tormentors would do to her naked and exposed body, one of the women writhes in a coquettish gesture in an attempt to win them over. “She was trying to use the only weapon she had—her desirability” (62). In a direct parallel, Naomi’s family is continually endeavoring to show themselves to be valuable workers and worthy compatriots, seemingly to say that their Japaneseness need not derogate from their usefulness. But the women are shot anyway. They can say or do nothing to promote themselves in the eyes of those who wield the power. Their cries can elicit no sympathies. The authorities cannot be restrained by any appeals to justice, conscience, legality, morality, or religion. The women can’t appeal to their common humanity—the torturers would beg to differ. They cannot appeal to their potential for pain and suffering—the officials would say that there’s all the more satisfaction to be derived thereby. They were condemned from the start. Their almond eyes had long ago sealed their fate. There can only be silence.

Fast-forward to the present of the early 1970’s:

In a belated gesture of good-will Mr. Barker, as emissary of a latter-day Canada, comes to express his grief and, in a well-intentioned attempt, to try to make some small amends for the past. It was past, it has to be said, in which the Nakanes languished in a forgotten
corner of his property, living in poverty and need. They were an isolated, degraded, and mistrusted people, suffering rigors and privations, and cast as a latter-day Helot people of the Canadian prairie, from whose labors Mr. Barker unjustly benefited. But Barker wants to show himself to be a new person. He’s divorced from his former consort who didn’t deign to allow Naomi in when she stood in the doorway of their society. For all his appearances, however, Mr. Barker still remains thoughtless and insensitive. He enters unasked, still treading on Naomi’s rights. He eventually betrays his subtle perceived estrangement and otherness from his Japanese compatriots. Mr. Barker’s extended hand is alas left wanting in common human sympathy. His failure to resolve his animus against his neighbors is a failure of the larger contemporary Canadian society for whom he’s only a mouthpiece. In the place of the stabbing eyes that were an affront, Ms. Baker’s gaze looks right past them, indifferent. Even after three generations Naomi and her family are still outcasts, deracines, and foreigners. Full acceptance and formal equality as fellow Canadian citizens still eludes the Nakanes. And, without equality there can be no real justice.

For Obasan it becomes a reward to be able to turn a deaf ear to this, life’s dissonance. Her silence is a gentle rebuke to Mr. Barker’s claptrap but, in the end, it does nothing to provide recompense for their losses or any meaningful closure to the past. Obasan seems to harbor an unverbalized and unquestioned resignation to their lot in life as the accursed people who must suffer in polite silence the foolish notions of others. In contrast, Naomi’s silence is a muted cry that pleads for acknowledgement and understanding. And, Aunt Emily argues in outspoken words that this national reconciliation isn’t going to come about through some kind of wordless osmosis. In the end it’s with Aunt Emily that Kogawa seems to side, ending the novel with a document that apparently comes from her diary.

Kogawa asks the nation to see the security problem for what it really was—a social problem. She cautions us through Aunt Emily not to allow ourselves to mistakenly think that any such callous inhumanity should be accepted as the natural order of things. She further implores us to question the comfortable conventions that camouflage and obfuscate the hateful and the chauvinistic ideologies; to foster an understanding by bridging the inner distance of perceived differences between ourselves and those over whom we exercise power; and to temper that power, even over our conceived underlings, with due restraint, responsibility, compassion, and mercy.

Works Cited:

