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Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and The Japanese Internment

Introduction

In a preface to *The Enemy That Never Was*, Ken Adachi—a Japanese Canadian writer and literary critic[1]—notes that the internment of Japanese Canadians feels as if "a conspiracy of silence has hidden the facts [...]", with the "episode ignored in major Canadian texts" (Adachi, 1976). While the detention of Japanese Americans has received considerable scholarly attention[2], far less has been paid to their Canadian counterparts. Therefore, this paper discusses Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) – one of the first novels about the internment of Japanese Canadians (Sasano, 2024).

Background

Japanese Immigration to Canada

Adachi (1976) states that the first Japanese to reach Canadian shores was the 19-year-old sailor Manzo Nagano in 1877 (pp. 9), representing the first wave of Japanese immigrants – the *issei*, former peasants (Sunahara, 2000, pp. 5) who predominantly moved to British Columbia (Hartmut, 2005, p. 319).

Adachi further elaborates that until 1907, Japanese immigrants were exclusively male and lived in squalid conditions. An act known as the "Gentlemen's Agreement" limited the number of men coming to Canada to 400 until the wives and children of resident Japanese Canadians were permitted to enter the country (pp. 80).

Ann Gomer Sunahara comments that Japanese Canadians, even those born in Canada – referred to as *nisei* – faced many barriers to finding employment due to racial tensions and the restrictions placed on them (pp. 173). Japanese Canadians holding university degrees were not allowed to enter teaching or public services jobs, as "social taboos discouraged Caucasian businessmen from hiring [them] in any but the most menial capacity" (pp. 5).

Following the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, Japanese Canadians were moved to live in detention camps, having to relinquish their former possessions and homes (Staines, 2020, pp. 215). Of those 22,000 detained (Sunahara, 2000, pp. 1), three-quarters were Canadian citizens (Adachi, 1976). Not only were Japanese Canadians uprooted from their homes, but they were dispersed across Canada and – if they refused to be detained – deported to Japan (Sunahara 2000, pp. 1).

[1] https://abcbookworld.com/writer/adachi-ken/
[2] https://illiterature.org/writing/

The publication of *Obasan* coincided with the Redress Movement (Hartmut, 2005, p. 319), a civil rights campaign in the 1980s that, as Sunahara describes, aimed for the Canadian government to publicly address the suffering that Japanese Canadians had endured (pp. 153-154).

Previous Studies

The Development of Japanese Canadian Fiction

According to Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn (2008), the emergence of Japanese American fiction paved the path for Japanese Canadian works (pp. 11). John Okada's *No-No Boy*, published in 1957, tells the story of a young Japanese American man named Ichiro Yamada and the aftermath of World War II, as he struggles to find his place in a world where he feels neither Canadian nor American (cf. Pal, 2011).

In a foreword to the novel, Ruth Ozeki argues that it was groundbreaking due to its raw and honest depiction of the trauma Japanese Americans battled after the events of WWII during a time when "[they] were busy keeping their heads down, assimilating, and working on becoming the model minority of 1950s America" (Okada 2014).

Furthermore, Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońsk (2023) explains that Japanese American fiction from the second half of the 20th century often explored the search for one's identity (pp. 8-9). Similarly, Japanese Canadians investigated their cultural identity in fiction (cf. Ty & Verduyn, 2008, pp. 3-6), with writers such as Terry Watada and Kerri Sakamoto penning novels about Japanese Canadians and the trauma of their internment.

Japanese Canadian Fiction and Identity

Ty and Verduyn (2008) contend that Asian Canadian fiction was overshadowed by the predominance of white writers and the political barriers placed on Asian communities. Asian Canadian fiction gained popularity in the late 1970s, with the emergence of writers such as Joy Kogawa, Rohinton Mistry, and Michael Ondaatje. While early works focused on issues such as immigration and assimilation into Canadian society, more recent ones have explored topics that delve beyond the author's ethnicity, also addressing the fluidity of one's cultural identity, among other issues (pp. 3-6).

For example, in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Hiromi Goto details the fluid nature of identity by telling the story of three Japanese Canadian women, each representing a different generation. The oldest, Naoe, clings to her Japanese identity, while her daughter, Keiko, has fully incorporated Canadian values, not even encouraging her daughter, Muriel (later renamed Murasaki), to learn Japanese.

A Summary of *Obasan*

Obasan, by Joy Kogawa, depicted in Figure 1, revolves around Naomi Nakane, a thirty-six-year-old schoolteacher living in Alberta who becomes her elderly aunt's (referred to as Obasan) carer after her uncle's death. Through a series of letters from her other aunt, Emily, Naoe not only has to come to terms with the interment her family lived through but finally learns the truth behind her mother's disappearance.

Figure 1

A picture of Joy Kogawa.

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The Role of Silence in *Obasan*

Obasan reveals how silence serves as a coping mechanism for its narrator Naomi, as A. Lynne Magnusson (1988) expresses, due to growing up in an environment that discouraged talking about the trauma experienced in the detention camps (pp. 63): "There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that we will not speak" (Kogawa, 1981, pp. 7).

Gary Willis (1987) implies that by keeping mum about tragic events, such as the bombing of Nagasaki and the disfigurement of their mother, the narrator's guardians attempted to shield her and her brother from the consequences of such a traumatic ordeal (pp. 240). In Obasan's case, a lack of words functions as a shield: "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" (pp. 17).

Obasan's taciturn nature juxtaposes the character of Aunt Emily, who spends her time documenting the internment—implied to be a response to trauma that keeps her trapped in a vicious cycle, fixated on challenging the lacklustre stance of the Canadian government that still has not apologised to the Japanese community (Sarkar & Fareen, 2024, pp. 111).

The silence in *Obasan* reflects reality, as indicated in Eli Yoko Hartman's (2024) account about her family:

> The trauma and shame experienced during the Second World War led to an ongoing conspiracy of silence. Many survivors remained tight-lipped, and the generations that followed were kept in the dark, without understanding or knowing what happened to their families. (p. 11)

Sunahara (2000) states that the *nisei* felt humiliated by the belief that they were responsible for their internment due to failing to integrate into Canadian culture (pp. 149). Shame and humiliation left the documentation of these events to the younger generation, who were either children or not yet born—a concept elaborated on by Marianne Hirsch (2012), who refers to this as *post-memory,* a shared, collective experience of a traumatic event (pp. 5).

In this vein, *Obasan*, based on Kogawa's childhood memories, not only offered the Canadian mainstream an idea of the suffering that Japanese Canadians went through (cf. Hartmut, 2005, p. 319) but also gave voice to the issei whose poor command of English, as well as shame over their internment, did not allow them to tell their stories (cf. Jarmołowicz-Dziekońsk, 2024, pp. 8-9).

Discussion

As a consequence of their internment, Sunahara (2000) observes that many *nisei* either suppressed or eradicated parts of their Japanese identity, resulting in their children growing up with little to no knowledge of the Japanese language and equally oblivious of what had happened to their grandparents during the war. Instead, their parents insisted that they become successful Canadian citizens, untainted by a history that was still too painful for them to speak about (pp. 150).

Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* addresses the reluctance of Japanese Canadians to discuss the internment camps in the following scene:

> "I'll leave him. I don't care what anyone says." Something must have shown on my face, for she smiled. "It's all right, Saito-san. I know people say waru-guchi about Yano, even the children say bad things. The Nakamuras. Maybe your brother too. The people who never come to his redress meetings. All he does is talk about the war and the camps when they just want to forget. They think he's crazy, I know." (Sakamoto, 1998, p. 225)

Denial led to the silencing of the historical event itself, which was shattered by the publication of *Obasan*. *Obasan* reflects on the reluctance to talk about the past and shows how Naomi can only overcome her trauma by confronting it with the documentation and images that Aunt Emily provides her with, even if she is more inclined to side with her Obasan in feeling that constantly digging up painful memories is counterintuitive (Harris, 1990, pp. 43).

Conclusion

Inspired by *Obasan*, writers such as Hiromi Goto, Kerri Sakamoto, and Ruth Ozeki tackle racism and trauma in a more contemporary and feminist manner. Their novels, which would benefit from more academic attention, feature independent Japanese-Canadian women who subvert societal expectations by leading extraordinary and unusual lifestyles.

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