

# The Difficulty of Balancing Cultures in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*: A Critical Observation

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this research paper is to shed light on Joy Kogawa's fiction Obasan (1981), which will be viewed as a continuing construction of the difficulty of identity on several levels: individual, social, political, cultural, and generational. Kogawa presents significant concerns of the day, examining the borders of race and culture in the process and arriving at more complicated conceptions of balancing Japanese-Canadian culture in the novel. Obasan chronicles the fight of Japanese Canadian cultures against long-standing racial discrimination, wartime imprisonment, and the double displacement and banishment, all of which were inflicted by Canadians against Canadians of Japanese origin. The question of how an ethnic group might survive and reproduce lies at the crossroads of the tale of cultural pain and the story of women's lives, a mission that puts on added significance when a cultural group seems to be under siege.*

*The paper will also examine the immigrant and the cultures of disadvantaged communities and metaphorical themes of rebirth with a strong record. The utter disruption of Japanese cultural and physical reproduction that had begun during the war was completed by Canada's postwar policy of protracted exile and, in some cases, deportation to Japan. In her work, Kogawa openly traces this historical interruption of Asian reproduction. Despite an overt Japanese societal mandate to reproduce, Naomi and her Aunt Emily are both orphaned and unmarried. The paper will employ conceptual notions to underline what one believes the novels convey in terms of identity construction, but the novel itself would be at the centre of the debate. The qualitative method research will be applied to elaborate and examine the critical points.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Culture, Reproduction, Ethnic group, Postwar policy, Displacement, and Banishment

## Paper

Immigrants/Japanese Canadians and Canadian citizens are one of Joy Kogawa's primary topics in her novel *Obasan* (1981). On the one hand, Kogawa's work concentrates on the Canadian environment, but on the other, it demonstrates how the forced displacement of Japanese Canadians from their residential properties influenced their educational success.

The story revolves around three major main characters: Obasan, Aunt Emily, and Naomi, and raises immigration, nationality, and cultural pride. This paper also examines the troublesome cultural identity of immigrants/citizens, their attempts to incorporate into the new culture crisis caused by Canadian immigration policies for the interned Japanese throughout World War II, and their protest against this embarrassing circumstance by concentrating on these three characters.

Kogawa's writing is a chronicle of silence set within the multicultural storytelling culture, according to reviewers. Nevertheless, as Coral Howells points out, it would be more accurate to describe the immigrant's situation in Canada as "transcultural" instead of "multicultural" because this state entails a continual balance of native and adopted cultures. Such a position grants access to two worlds, which might be viewed as a "great privilege" at times. (Hutcheon 99).

*Obasan* by Kogawa depicts the terrible condition that the immigrants face from a distinct perspective. The Pearl Harbor attack transformed their lives in a culture they had known for a long time, or in the instance of Japanese Canadians, who were born into a community where they were considered enemies. This new identity not only robs them of all they had built as immigrants or residents of that nation but also puts them in an ambiguous position where they must ask themselves: Who are they, exactly? Were they newcomers from Japan? Was it possible that they were Canadian citizens?

In the face of a challenge argumentation, the direct interaction between immigrant and native Canadians in an inequitable, imbalance context, a precise ideological scenario, tends to lead to a victim/victimizer connection, which Homi Bhabha discusses and places them in what he calls the "ambivalence in the relationship" (192). The possibilities for opposition and manipulation in this unbalanced conflict are particularly relevant for the current study. The paper highlights the differences between Issei- Canadian residents born or raised in

Japan—and Nisei—people of Japanese descent born and raised in Canada- which leads them to adopt different measures. Like immigrants in any nation, immigrants in Canadian literature experience emotions of separation from society and the land. In the story, Obasan (Naomi's aunt) and Uncle Sam are immigrants who are socially separated from culture.

The immigration of Japanese people to Canada dates back to 1870. They resided as “immigrants” for over a century until a Japanese military force attacked the United States, and as immigrants, they were unknown to mainstream society. These terrible occurrences strip individuals of not just their constitutional protections but also of their “invisibility” or “unmarked identity,” transforming them into “devil” or “dangerous criminals” to be imprisoned in internment camps or at Guantanamo Bay. Their citizen status is instantly revoked, and, as if that was not bad enough, they are forced to feel guilty for something they did not do.

It must have been one of the reasons why the Japanese people of Canada, both those who were interned and their descendants, remained silent for so long. Despite the fact that Asian Americans, especially those of Japanese ancestry, have resided in the North American hemisphere for over 150 years, nothing of their experiences, history, heritage, nation, and literature are portrayed in American or Canadian writing, whether history books or literature. A handful of works on the subject have just recently begun to appear. Young Japanese Canadians, less motivated by their grandparents' cultural identity, intend to stay quiet. Their choice to bring awareness to this traumatic experience has resulted in many literary works on the subject.

For the past thirty years or more, many literary works have concentrated on the Canadian/American Japanese and World War II. The internment of Japanese Americans or Japanese Canadians has suddenly become the center of fascination for youthful Canadian and Japanese American authors. The Japanese community in Brazil was likewise subjected to this horrible experience, but a portrayal of the Japanese experience in Brazil has yet to emerge. Many of these works, written mainly by the Japanese American or Canadian writers such as *The Dream of Water* by Kyoko Mori, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Warrior Woman* (1976), the autobiographical novel *The Ink-Keeper's Apprentice* by Allen Say, published in 1979. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), David Hwang's *Madame Butterfly* (1989), Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989), Graham Salisbury's *Under the Blood-Red Sun* (1994), and Frank Chin's epic *Gunga Din Highway* (1994) have helped establish a credible Asian American presence in the world of contemporary letters. These works are more related

to speculative novels, with young Japanese Canadians or Americans born in Canada or the United States as protagonists. As citizens of these countries, their tone is one of reconciliation, minimizing the cultural differences between their new country and the country of their forefathers, as they live with the anticipations of their older Japanese relatives and learn about the nation of their ancestors as someone who has not resided there. Cultural differences are represented in Say's work, as they are in Mori's, by authors who lived in Japan until they moved to the United States as teenagers. The emotion of the following generation, who is deeply attached to its American or Canadian identity and refuses to accept prejudice, is captured in Kogawa's pre-and post-World War Japanese experience.

*Obasan* is a powerful, well-crafted lyrical and meditative account of a Japanese-Canadian family's experiences with anti-Japanese racism in Canada during World War II. It demonstrates how much hatred can cost when it becomes a principle, whether the cost is measured in terms of personal pleasure or the survival of a whole civilization. Kogawa connects people from different eras and civilizations, as measured by historical distinctions. Stuart Hall defines cultural identity in considerations 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 reflected everyday historical experiences. They 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. (79)

The majority of these books, authored by the first Japanese (Nisei) born in the United States or Canada, center on the shock of Pearl Harbor, the internment years, and the anti-Japanese attitudes that persisted after the war. The narrator is frequently a youngster who recounts the forced evacuation of Japanese citizens who were only permitted to take what they could carry; treasured things were lost or sold for pennies on the dollar. There is a tremendous sense of loss in these stories, yet no one seems to hold a grudge towards the Canadians or Americans. In *Obasan*, Kogawa depicts not just the loss but also the anguish that comes with it. Her protagonist is "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" (Kogawa 183).

Both fans and critics greeted Kogawa's novel with open arms from the outset. The literary language of the work, the representation of quiet, and the description of the natural beauty of the Canadian countryside all drew quick notice. Kogawa's depictions of Japanese topics have garnered very little notice, with a few notable exceptions. It appears that critics prefer to overlook Kogawa's political consequences, thereby obliterating "culture" and "race" as aspects of her story.

The story is based on Kogawa's autobiography. The events are set in Marpole (Vancouver), at a house on 64th Avenue where Kagawa had lived as a child, and depict the removal of Japanese-born Canadians from the British Columbian coast to the secret prison at Slocan, a tourist hotspot in British Columbia, and eventually to the Alberta prairies during World War II. The novel enacts a technique of reliving the past to deal with a child's sentiments of loss as she is forced to split from her family and her residence in Vancouver.

Expulsion into the Canadian bush signifies the erasing of a whole cultural identity, which she expresses via her perspective of what she sees as a voyage into the dark: Expulsion into the Canadian bush signifies the erasing of a whole cultural identity, which she expresses via her perspective of what she sees as a voyage into the dark: "We are going down the middle of the earth with pick-ax eyes, tunneling by train into the Interior, carried along by the momentum of the expulsion into the waiting wilderness" (Kogawa 132).

The novel depicts kinship pain and extended shifts on train lines, populated, filthy assembly facilities; horse stalls as homes; the desert with sand storms and extremes of temperature; rushing to the washroom and the dining area; the break-up of family members who no longer sat around a table to eat together; and worry about fathers who were imprisoned in other states. Despite these difficulties, the endeavour to maintain Japanese culture is visible, as seen by the little Bonsai gardens in the sand that Kogawa exhibits between the desert-like environment.

Nevertheless, by continuing to grow up in a culture such as Canadian, American, or Brazilian, young Nisei feel trapped between two cultures; the pride of both the young and their parents, as well as the confinement, especially on the part of the parents; the sustained loyalty to the new country and remarkable acceptance of situations such as the detention leads one to dig deeper, dig the literature, and identify the situation. It is worth noting that the historical foundation of the distinguishing aspects of Japanese culture shown in these works of literature is a synthesis of two theological beliefs.

On the one hand, we have Confucian ideals, which have been a part of Japanese society since the seventh century in the matter of appreciation for authority, devotion to duty, and family loyalty; on the other hand, we imply Shinto, the native Japanese theology, as we see appreciation for nature and a choice for simplicity as the significant aspects of Japanese culture.

The story in *Obasan* brings in two aspects and two perspectives of life; one lived by the Issei and the other lived by the Nisei. For Naomi Nakane, often called Naomi, it is incomprehensible as an adult, looking back on this experience, how she and her people could have been exiled in her own native country. As it travels from the past to the present and the memories of the narrator Naomi Nakane, Kogawa's story distorts the recognized sequence of identities. It prefigures the immigrants, amid a worldwide movement of Asians, distinguishing between the cultures of origin, by combining the anguish of immigrants with the isolation of the Second World War. As Rao observes: "It is also a novel that denounces and protests the treatment accorded to Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, when they were moved to camps and had their lands confiscated" (2004).

The novel presents two aunts, the older one whom Naomi calls "Obasan" or "AyaObasan" and the younger one whom she calls "Aunt Emily." "Obasan" is an Issei; "Aunt Emily," a Nisei. Between the Issei-Canadian residents born or grew in Japan- and the Nisei- people of Japanese ancestry born and reared in Canada- the contrast between two aunts is remarkable. Obasan is Issei, or first-generation Japanese, while Aunt Emily is Nisei or second-generation Japanese born in Canada, and Naomi is Sansei or third-generation Japanese Canadian.

Early in the novel, when Naomi is first browsing through Aunt Emily's parcel, she observes that every time the words "Japanese race" appears in the new articles or pamphlets, Aunt Emily has crossed them out and written "Canadian citizens." Therein lies the identity problem. Naomi's family was viewed as visitors and then, with the outbreak of war, as the enemy but crossing the words, Aunt Emily refuses to accept herself as Japanese race. She rejects her cultural identity and assumes the self-imposed identity in which she sees herself as a Canadian woman.

The words "Japanese race" and Aunt Emily's sentence "You are your history. If you cut any of it off, you are an amputee." function as a refrain in the novel and, as such, are crucial to the understanding of Aunt

Emily (Willis 249). Aunt Emily's insistence on being Canadian is inextricably linked to the second line, just as her character becomes the first manifestation. The sentence is ironic once more. On the surface, it appears to be a remark on the issue of national identity. It also refers to the importance of remembering and not forgetting history and the past. We might argue that she blurs the boundary between herself and her past when she expresses herself. Furthermore, the concept of being Canadian connects with Aunt Emily's teetering status since it is linked to both Canada's colonial past and politics.

In this new context, the phrase "Japanese race" was angled with concerns of internment and Japanese immigrants'/citizens' interactions. This word serves to further establish Canadian Japanese as a "criminalized" entity, specifically in the area of the sentence in which it appears. Aunt Emily rejects this by assuming an imposed identity as she says, "For better or worse, *I am Canadian*" (Kogawa, 48). For Uncle Sam, she is "Nisei, not very Japanese like" (Kogawa 48).

Silence and seclusion are a component of Japanese identity for Obasan and Naomi, but it appears that Aunt Emily's isolation is self-inflicted. She pushes herself to be Canadian. Therefore she ignores her ancestors' characteristics. Denial stems from the imposition of a new identity that she believes she must adapt to be elected in her community. Kogawa creates a setting in which identity is both manufactured and enforced in *Obasan*.

In Naomi and Obasan, recognition and arrangement do not result in the terrible scenario that aunt Emily is in. It is an imposition of identity for her, which she may not have taken if the situation were reversed. As ElenoraRao observes, "By disrupting the possibility of a homogeneous national identity and the idea of home, *Obasan* creates a destabilized space from which Naomi begins to reconstruct her history and identity. The representations of the landscapes, across which Naomi and her family are forced to move, serve to show how unstable national identities are, and how such identities are shaped by the intersections of historical circumstances and the physical landscape..." (97-120). Angelika Bammer has remarked, they "are always constructed and lived out on the historical terrain between necessity and choice, the place where oppression and resistance are simultaneously created" (Bammer 1994).

To sum up, the conflict these two characters face reveals a re-conception of immigrants as cultural citizens that have emerged in the formation of Canadian identity criticism after and during World War II. In *Obasan*, Kogawa does more than legitimize the notion of immigrant identity as a designed individuality and

Canadian Japanese cultural identity as both constructed (in the case of Naomi) and imposed (in the case of aunt Emily), bringing to light a complicated system of philosophies and ethnicity structures that continue to shape the future of Japan. The formation of Canadian citizens as a historically contingent figure- the concealed status of immigrants in the cultural form of a new Canadian cultural diversity.

The current article focuses on the cultural difficulty of identity formation, their struggle to assimilate into the new environment provided by Canadian Immigrant Policies for the interned Japanese during World War II, and their protest against this embarrassing position. *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa depicts a situation in which immigrants are caught between two worlds. In the context of community discourse, the direct encounter between immigrant and native Canadians in an inequitable, imbalance configuration, a particular political circumstance, leads to a victim/victimizer connection, which Homi Bhabha discusses and places them in what he calls the “ambivalence in the relationship” in the perspective of post-colonial dialogue (191).

The potential for resistance and subversion from this unbalanced tension is particularly relevant to the current research. The article draws a contrast between Issei- Canadian residents born or raised in Japan and Nisei people of Japanese ancestry born and raised in Canada- to demonstrate how this disparity drives them to take different actions. The issue revolves around the significance of culture in their reactions to this specific scenario, including one aunt’s silent protest and the other aunt’s explicit and direct resistance to oppression or injustice. The article finds that the two basins, or aunts, in Kogawa’s novel represent two distinct types of reactions to confinement in Canada that are founded in their respective cultures.

The extraction in *Obasan* is the validation of Emily’s package and Naomi’s claim to memory. Naomi is trapped in a limbo of Japanese Canadian ancestry, where she is both mute and thirsty for information. The novel demonstrates the importance of remembering one’s background. Kogawa’s novel articulately uncovers the plight of Japanese Canadians through Naomi’s struggle to make sense of various traumatic and disconcerting life experiences, which begin to come naturally as she comprehends the deeper issues of her mother’s disappearance and rises above her dissatisfied recollections of deracination towards the fullness of identity and culture.

Therefore, this cultural consciousness and the notion of Canadian identity are already in the early stages of development. The country lacks numerous characteristics classified as a “traditional” society, such as a shared



ethnicity, culture, language, and cultural values. Citizens of Canada are not united by race, they do not share the same values, and they sometimes do not share the same faith.

The individuals in Kogawa's *Obasan* have various views about their Japanese background, none of which are perfectly accessible. Although Emily is also an outspoken advocate for Japanese Canadians' fundamental freedoms, she dismisses the notion that her nationality distinguishes her from any other citizen of Canada. She calls oneself a Canadian and despises the concept that her ancestry distinguishes her from her neighbours in just about any manner. Aunt Emily's perspective, though rational, somehow does not represent the realities of many Japanese Canadians, according to Kogawa. However, Joy Kogawa believes that merely insisting that no one will see a distinction between Canadians and Canadians of Japanese heritage avoids dealing with the reality as it might be.

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