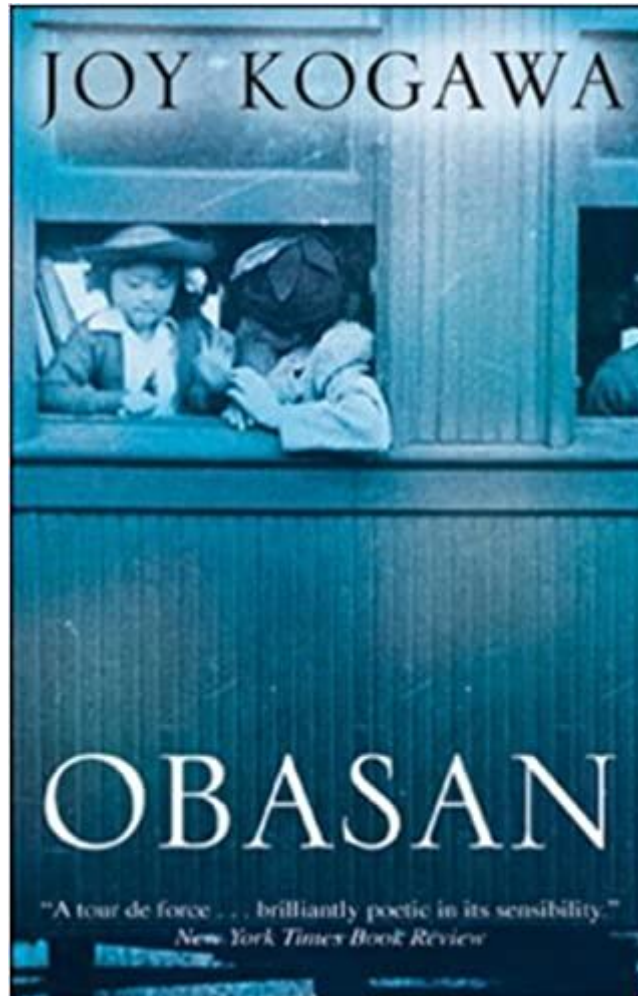


The Language of Silence in Joy Kagawa's *Obasan*

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Abstract

Joy Kagawa's masterpiece work *Obasan* records the history of an individual, a family and of a generation. The novel sings the song of silence, and the title character is the epitome of silence. The political significance of the work is on the internment of Canada's Japanese residents during World War II. It is a original work and expressive of a sensibility that wishes to

define in relation to each other, Japanese and Canadian way of seeing and even to combine those divergent perceptions in an integrated and distinctive vision.

Keywords: Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, memories, silence, speech, internment camp, tombstone, dream.

In her debut novel *Obasan*, 1981, Joy Kogawa presents a peoples' plight with historical authenticity about the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II and demonstrates her understanding of the emotive power of words as conveyed through literature. Set in 1972, the novel centers around the memories and experiences of Naomi Nakane, a thirty six year old schoolteacher living in rural Canadian town of Cecil, Alberta. Naomi is simply the literary incarnation of Kogawa herself with her painful experience of internment and concentration camp as she had undergone along with her family at the tender age of six. Naomi is presented as a person lost in the nightmare created by her silence; only by expressing her feelings she can reach understanding and emotional health. The novel is therapeutic for Naomi; for Kagawa herself and above all potentially therapeutic for the community of Japanese Canadians. It weaves a seamless tale that stretches between a generation, span a continent and decades with a dream. The dream that is terrifying; the silence that can't speak; the love that is voiceless yet vivid; the grief that cries out loudly yet unheard. The story is in flashback as the protagonist, Naomi looks back as an adult finding out what really happened to her family and their loved ones during the horrible chapter of history. "From silence and suffering to voice and resolution, this novel is about survival, multicultural style...". (Day 6)

Obasan, however is with the presence of an erased maternal figure. The text doesn't seek to answer the question, "who am I", but attempts to question, "what are the different ways of being?" In tracing "being" as constituted both in silence and language. It is concerned with how non-language or language maintains or breaks down psycho-social repression. With beautiful poetic language the novel insists on fusing the personal with historical horizons and collapses the boundaries between autobiography and fiction and uplifts itself to a classical level of an emotional catharsis of a self as well as a generation. In her book, *A Poetics of Post Modernism* (1998), Linda Hutcheon speaks about the distinction of literature and history. In this book she calls *Obasan* as a "Histography met-fiction" where Naomi's personal memory is confronted with makers of recorded history (the diary, the letters and the official documents) the textualized accessibility of the past to us. In the large part the muted history finds its voice through literature and breaks its stony silence through language. Naomi is imprinted by history and maimed by past and seems to be a very redundant narrator who remembers the past events as extremely painful experiences. Her reluctance to reveal the truth or break the silence is a typical "postmodern feature" (as defined by Hutcheon). By her refusal to speak and remember and make herself visible as Aunt Emily demands it as her refusal to integrate fragments of past. Naomi's narrative technique, quoting documents and diaries succeeded in creating a fiction of sociological documentation although it lacks to be considered as an integrated and coherent story.

The opening two lines of the novel “silence that cannot speak” and “silence that will not speak” manifest the true tone of the work that is, some people can’t speak about the past because it is too painful to recall while other group of people choose not to speak about the past for other reasons. Naomi’s story is a journey from oppressive silence into a freeing speech. The reading of the novel is of keeping to the usual western hierarchy which values speech as active and having agency, silence as passive and having no agency. But here this hierarchy doesn't exist in this way as traditional Japanese culture. King-kok Cheung in his book Articulate silence (1993) has observed that, "most reviewers of Joy Kogawa's Obasan has applied the hierarchical opposition of language and silence to the very novel that disturbs the hierarchy".

A middle school teacher with her uncle Isamu is on her annual trip to Coulee in Granton, Alberta in 1972. This was an annual trip that started from 1954. Naomi memorized the town dominated by white Canadians and a few mystified incidents. She got the news of her uncle’s death and went for a courtesy visit to her aunt or Obasan as called in the Japanese language. Both the women went to their old attic, where a great secret is silenced for years. They found a large number of documents and letters treasured but in mute condition. There lies the history of a family, a generation, and a nation. Naomi's thoughts were about her childhood days. A loving home in Vancouver, bubbled with innocent incidents i.e. releasing chick with a hen to another cage, tale of momotaro and her painful memory of molestation by an old man Gower at the tender age of four. In 1941, her mother went to Japan to visit the grandmother who was ill. But the mother never turned back. Both Naomi and her elder brother Stephen were left wondered about the mysterious disappearance of the mother. They were too small to be explained about the mother’s situation. Two kids were puzzled about the silence of whole family and confused on uncle Isamu’s remark “too young” and “someday” to know about the condition.

As an adult Naomi faces some of the same stonewalling situation that made a child so perplexing. She used to ask aunt Emily about her mother., for which she gets little more than a pained stare and a cryptic remark before Emily changes the topic. However Naomi does not react to this kind of evasion in direct way, she’s clearly frustrated with her aunt. Her irritation stems from the fact that Emily is more concerned with the broad issue then with specific. people and in Naomi's view, a bunch of people picking away at outraged letters will have little to no effect on anyone. She thinks about her family members not about the issue. Naomi is furious at the government for the cruelty towards people, but she is also disappointed by her aunt for failing to understand the pain. One night, she hears the adults of house whispering about whether or not to tell the children something...to which Obasan prays and Emily cries. Aunt Emily is with her cardboard folder packets, that was read by Obsana earlier that day with a magnifying glass. Being muffled by mysteries, Naomi sees dreams of her mother doing a death dance with a rose in her mouth and the rose is connected to Obasan’s twain and that is connected to and Emily’s package. A figure, Naomi called the grand Inquisitor descends and opens her eyes and her mother’s mouth. She wakes and things that, to understand her mother the grand Inquisitor has to listen to your silence. The roses the voice of silence that want to say the mother story. Naomi decides to stop her inquisition, her search for the truth; the truth that is imprisoned within the cardboard folder of Aunt Emily. There are the letters of grandma Kato to Grandpa Kato from

Japan. Among the two letters, the first letter is short and brief, whereas the second says that grandma Kato and Naomi's mother decided to keep silent that would help the horror abate. Naomi's mother specially didn't want her children to know what happened, but grandma wrote the horrible events to grandpa through letter expecting to relieve her pain and agony.

In 1945, grandma and Naomi's mother were in Nagasaki to help Naomi's cousin said Setsuko, with her newborn baby; Chiko, who was looking like Naomi. One day, grandma was getting ready to make lunch, baby Chiku strapped to her back, the bomb hit. Grandma was knocked unconscious but alive. Both of Setsuko's eyes had been blown out and her skin came off against grandma's hand, but she was still alive and calling for her son Tomio. Everywhere there were people hideously maimed and dying. Grandma headed towards the house of Setsuko's father-in-law, Tomio was gone and never found. One day grandma came across a bald woman whose appearance was hair raising as Kagawa describes:

“One evening when she had given up the search for the day, she sat down beside a naked woman she has seen earlier, who was aimlessly chipping wood to make fire on which to cremate a dead baby. The woman was utterly disfigured. Her nose and cheek were almost gone. Great wounds and pustules covered her entire face and body. She was completely bald. She sat in a cloud of flies and maggots wriggled among her, a vacant gaze, then let out a cry. It was my mother”. (286)

Naomi asks her mother to help her listen, she speaks to her mother as if she were there, telling her and shares her horror. She says that Obasan and uncle granted her mother's request for silence. Naomi says that silence destroyed them both; still struggling with the merits of silence versus the benefits of memory. Her nightmare about her mother helps her decide at least for the time that silence is best. The evil figure in the dream, the Inquisitor who brutally opens Naomi's eyes and your mother's mouth. For years she has been metaphorically attempting to force open her mother's mouth to wrench the story of those last years from her absent and now dead. However Naomi understands and forgives her mother's desire to keep silent about the atrocities she saw and suffered in the end, she seems to feel that the silence was not worth the price. She insists on the feeling of a mystical connection to her deceased mother as if she is still present somehow. While this is a comforting sensation, and the path is a strong argument for truth telling. Naomi must talk herself about her mother's presence because she has nothing else to go on. She has hard facts even the most disturbing hard facts are precious for her. She clings to the photos of her mother as if they are talisman, studying the buckles on her shoes as if they have some deep meaning, if Naomi knew more about her mother, she would had been in communication with her while she was still alive. Naomi wouldn't so desperately need to insist that she can still communicate with her after her death. Throughout the novel her mother is connected with the image of a tree. As a child she is bound to her mother whose address is lost in the mystery.

The mystery of silence is emphasized is a prologue which encapsulates the powerful struggle between speech and silence:

“There is silence that can’t speak. There is silence that will not speak. Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes from the amniotic deep. To attend its voice. I can hear it say is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is store”.

The brief passage presents at least three types of silence: the silence that is powerless to break itself, which is the silence of the aunt Aya; Uncle Isamu’s childless bride who raised Naomi and Stephen after their mother’s disappearance and father’s separation during the internment. The second category of silence is willful silence; one which has the power of speech but denies it. This is the silence of refusal as seen in the mystery mother’s opinion against “telling the children”. The last type of silence is of “that amniotic deep” of “speaking dream” from which comest’ “the speech that free”. Here Kagawa goes with biblical truth: “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John, 38:8) to conflate truth with speaking dream. The free speech comes from underground, from subconscious associated with the period of unity between child and mother – the foetal sleep of the child in the mother’s womb.

The silencing of the event in Nagasaki, where Naomi’s mother disfigured and later died is intended as a protection. It is also a request by Naomi’s mother; “Qodomo no tame ni” (for the sake of children) which is also the motto of Uncle Isamu and Aya Obasan’s silence. This silence however further conflicts the identity of Naomi who cannot reach a narrative of herself or construct a work identity. As Cheung knows “The novel depicts the plight of a child who does not know and cannot tell. Naomi has been withdrawn throughout childhood and adolescence; her quite disposition seems to be tied to her mother’s unexplained absence. As a girl she questions but receives no answer, as an adult she desists because she dreads knowing.” (Cheung 131)

The silence of Obasan is of a stick quality, a form at resistance against any form of discursive identification. Obasan’s silence and Naomi’s reaction to it shows how it is also the silence together with the demand of speech of Emily which guides and motivates Naomi’s Quest for uncovering her past and redefining her own identity. Resistance towards language displays the distinction between symbolic and semiotic qualities of language. If language is always the expression of loss it builds up and necessary or signifier itself. By her silence, Obasan rejects to build up this distance. She is the tombstone of her family – every details of past activities are buried within herself which can’t be transformed or changed by any language. Naomi also can’t follow Aunt Emily’s advice to write her version. She rather tells her story in a poetic unlined way by changing between her adult point of view and her childhood point of view then could be seen as a strategy by which her story aims at a quality of language, Julia Kristeva has called semiotic. The mystic poetry that Kagawa uses in Obasan appeared to be a search for the semiotic quality of language as can be seen in the quotes from the epigraph at the beginning of the book.

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