

Race, Gender, and Whiteness in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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From 1939 to 1945, the world was plunged into war. In response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, the Canadian Government established a system of internment for Japanese Canadians to curb supposed sedition. This sets the stage for Joy Kogawa's poignant novel *Obasan*, a powerful exploration of the plight of Japanese Canadians. A recurring aspect of the novel is the role racism plays in the individual lives of Naomi, her family, and the entirety of Canada as a nation. Throughout the novel, racism is explored in various dimensions: through the parallel existences of Japanese Canadians and Indigenous peoples, the notion of whiteness in Canadian society, educational pedagogy, and the interplay of race and gender. In exploring these aspects, Kogawa holds a mirror to Canada as a nation and poses important questions regarding Canada's position as a model country.

Obasan sets the stage from the opening pages for a significant revaluation of whiteness's role in Canada. The Prairie imagery where Naomi's Uncle performs his annual mourning ritual reflects the past atrocities against Indigenous peoples. "About a mile east is a spot which was once an Indian buffalo jump, a high steep. All the bones are still there, some stick right out of the side of a fresh landslide." (Kogawa 2). Additionally, Naomi compares Uncle to "Chief Sitting Bull" and compares her Indigenous Students to the Japanese children of Slocan. In this sense, the injustices of colonialism and imperialism merge via the victims' identities. The similarities and shared fates also reoccur in other chapters when the silence of Indigenous peoples mirrors the silence of the traumatised Japanese Canadians. For instance, like *Obasan*, the Indigenous Girl Lori "never says anything" (Kogawa 8). Similarly, Rough Lock Bill, an eccentric outcast of Slocan, associates her refusal to talk with the tale of the last Indigenous survivor who "never said a word" (Kogawa 146).

The trauma of racialization is enacted using two intertwined histories, those of the family, and the nation, that find their poignant juxtaposition in the photo of Naomi's grandparents "pasted over with Rule Britannia." (Kogawa 18). The fate of Naomi's family demonstrates how historical events intertwine with the lives of ordinary people. These narratives highlight the racialized concept of the nation defining itself through exclusion and notions of whiteness. The package Naomi receives from Aunt Emily recounts the racism targeted towards Japanese Canadians and the failure of Canada's image as a democratic, Christian nation. The clergy refusing communion to Uncle and the press spreading the yellow peril propaganda reinforce Aunt Emily's argument that "white Canadians feel more loyalty towards white foreigners than

they do towards us Canadians" (Kogawa 95). Implicated in this racism are not just government leaders but also ordinary Canadians: neighbours and citizens who profited from the losses inflicted on the Japanese community. The recurring metaphor of the white hen pecking the yellow chickens reinforces the connections between violence and whiteness: "To be yellow in the Yellow Peril game is to be weak and small. Yellow is to be chicken" (Kogawa 152).

Additionally, the text harkens back to the legacy of racialization by discussing an educational perspective. In the classroom, for instance, we see Naomi as a teacher. In a sense, the teacher reflects the author, dedicating herself to educating others: a minority group teaching a history lesson to the dominant group. This pedagogical thrust appears in Aunt Emily's efforts to overcome racial prejudice by trying "to make familiar, to make knowable, the treacherous yellow peril" (Kogawa 40). Aunt Emily's mission is supported not only by her political idealism but also by the narrator's understanding of the role of Japanese Canadians in Canada's history. Naomi astutely connects the contributions of Japanese Canadians to the early pioneers: "we are those pioneers who cleared the bush and the forest with our hands, the gardeners tending and attending the soil with tenderness. We are the Issei, the Nisei, and the Sansei, the Japanese Canadians." (Kogawa 112). Relocated to work on beet farms, Japanese Canadians bring with them life and prosperity to these new settlements. In this sense, the novel strives to attain a deeper meaning for the suffering experienced by Japanese Canadians: "We are the man in the Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of the light" (Kogawa 111).

The message of their experience is channelled through Naomi's Christian imagery of the community, offering its "souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice" (177), and through Aunt Emily's hopes for communal and national reconciliation using communication and "mutual recognition of facts" (Kogawa 183). However, despite overwhelming evidence of racialization, numerous scholars cite the novel as a "model discourse," or what Roy Miki calls "resolutionary" as opposed to "revolutionary": "all [academics] tend to incorporate a resolutionary aesthetic in their overall critical framing of the novel. The agreement is that Naomi resolves her silenced past. Hence, she establishes peace with the human rights violations that caused such havoc and grief to her, her family, and her community." (Miki, 143). Rachel Kanefsky discusses some of the early scholarships on *Obasan* that "reveal a commitment to critical humanist concerns" (13). More recently, Guy Beauregard, in his analysis of Kogawa criticism, identifies some "patterns of how critics have read and continue to read racialized texts and representations of histories of racism in Canada," noting a tendency to ignore the importance of racism (9). An example of such readings is Carol Ann Howells's discussion, which shifts attention away from the "historical indictment" to the "lyric intensity," as well as by injecting optimism into the ending (125). Akin to Howells, Erike Gottlieb emphasises healing, arguing that the "persecution and suffering" represented a crisis in Canadian history, with Canada falling "into the trap" of racist hysteria. (38-42).

Interestingly, overt criticism of racism is confined to Aunt Emily throughout *Obasan*. In doing so, Aunt Emily becomes marked as "extreme" compared to her fellow Japanese Canadians. Her outspokenness is often foiled by Naomi's innate scepticism and by the very portrayal of Aunt Emily as a "little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse" and a bulldozer (Kogawa 33-35). The initial dismissal of victimisation on the part of Naomi, and her debates with Aunt Emily regarding objectivity, add yet another layer to this complex interplay. Naomi and Aunt Emily are already marginalised by their race and gender; as such, they employ the trope of masking, often involving tonal maskings such as a reasonable tone and the use of euphemisms such as "prejudice" instead of racism. Likewise, the choice of *Obasan* as a novel rather than an autobiography can be construed as yet another form of masking. Kogawa's use of narrative masking can be seen as a means of negotiating "the tension between the communal act of witnessing and ... the specific experiences of the individual self" (Yamamoto 122). Such strategies, however, can be double-edged: they reinforce the complex message while, at the same time, making the message more palatable.

The meaning of the text "depends on who reads it, as well as the conditions under which it is read" (Kamboureli 197). Most critical responses to the novel seek closure in the narrative's approach from silence to speech. This need for coming to terms with the past arises from a refusal to conceive the nation's racist founding. The discourse around *Obasan* also argues that there is a tendency by readers to view the text as an isolated racist incident rather than an indictment of current systemic racism. One tactic used by critics is to privilege the internment of Japanese Canadians while ignoring the presence of racism as a trauma pervasive throughout the novel.

Additionally, it is essential to note that the internment in the novel finds the desired closure in the redress movement, which could be considered a reason for the novel's "safe" positioning in the national zeitgeist. Perhaps, in this sense, it is the racial unease that causes critics to contain the problem of racism to a single historical fragment while at the same time ignoring the mass hysteria prior to Pearl Harbor. Quite predictably, Emily's liberalism invites "liberal" interpretations of the novel. However, as Kamboureli observes, because Emily never recognizes racialization as "embedded in the foundations of the Canadian state, she unwittingly reproduces the liberal ideology that justifies racism within a democratic framework" (188). Her scribbling symbolises her denial on the pamphlet: whenever the words "Japanese race" is used, she replaces them with "Canadian citizen" (Kogawa 33).

The interplay between gender and racism is consistently highlighted through the novel's central figuration of racism as a form of rape. Racism and sexual violence are the dirty secrets of the novel, and they are connected through Naomi as a survivor with a "double wound" (Kogawa 243). The racializing gaze acts as the link between racism and rape, manifesting in the stares of white Canadians and the violation of Naomi's body by Old Man Gower. The harmful gases of white Canadians stand in stark contrast to the

images of Naomi's mother's eyes, which are described as the "eyes of Japanese motherhood" that "do not invade or betray" (59). According to Di Brandit, Kogawa "makes a connection between the western use of the gaze and the tendency towards colonisation, to "invade and bray" non-Western cultures" (119). The connection between racist abuse and rape is reinforced further by Naomi's dream about "three beautiful oriental women" lying naked on a muddy road. Like the abused four-year-old Naomi, these women believe that "The only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive" (Kogawa 61). One of the women "was trying to use the only weapon she had — her desirability." (Kogawa 62). In a sense, this moment reflects the racialization of sexuality and the violent connection between race and gender.

Throughout the narrative, racism and rape also connect through the metaphor of darkness, in which Naomi plunges after being assaulted by Old Man Gower. Racism and sexual abuse are traumas similarly shrouded in silence and shame. When her brother returns from his all-white school badly beaten, Naomi empathises with his silence: "Is he ashamed, as I was in Old Man Gower's bathroom? Should I go away?" (Kogawa 70). In this context, Naomi's final insight, tying together her inability to disclose her abuse and her mother's silence, and her symbolic donning of Aunt Emily's coat, represent an understanding that silence can collude with abuse and make it possible to continue.

Racism is an integral element to Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, as a powerful reminder of the atrocities committed by Canadians during the Second World War. Racism, in the context of *Obasan*, appears in a myriad of forms, from the pedagogical examination in an educational sense to acting in collusion with rape and sexual violence. As this essay has explored, the discourse surrounding *Obasan* as a racial text has been complex, with some scholars arguing the importance of questioning Canada's position as a liberal ideal and others downplaying the role of race as a fundamental element of the text. However, it is essential to note that the text also alludes to the connection between Indigenous Peoples and Japanese Canadians, with their shared experiences of racism and imperialism. *Obasan* makes a striking argument about racism in the fabric of Canada as a nation - highlighting the silencing of minorities within Canada and the colonialism of white Canadians, both past and present.

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