Obasan Study Guide

Obasan by Joy Kogawa

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Contents

Obasan Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Introduction....4
Author Biography....5
Plot Summary....6
Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4....9
Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8....11
Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13....13
Chapter 14....16
Chapters 15, 16 and 17....18
Chapters 18, 19 and 20....20
Chapters 21, 22 and 23....22
Chapters 24, 25 and 26....24
Chapters 27, 28 and 29....26
Chapters 30, 31, 32 and 33....27
Chapters 34, 35, 36, 37, 38 and 39....29
Characters....31
Themes....37
Style....40
Historical Context....42
Critical Overview....45
Criticism....47
Critical Essay #1....48
Critical Essay #2....52
Critical Essay #3....59

Topics for Further Study.......61

What Do I Read Next?.......62

Further Study.......63

Bibliography.......65

Copyright Information.......66

Introduction

Winning both the Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Canadian Authors' Association Book of the Year Award, *Obasan* was the first novel to deal with the Canadian internment of its Japanese citizens during and after World War II. Written by the poet Joy Kogawa, the novel appeared in 1981 while the efforts of Japanese Canadians to win redress from the Canadian government for internment were in high gear. The novel has been the focus of much criticism exploring its treatment of landscape, identity, and mother-culture.

The autobiographical work tells the story of a schoolteacher, Naomi, remembering the struggle to grow up as a third generation Japanese Canadian amid the hysteria of World War II. Being so young when internment began, she did not understand what was happening and nobody tried to explain it to her. She loses her mother as a result, she thinks, of her sexual abuse by a neighbor. Then she loses her father when all Japanese must go to the interior or to work camps. Given the circumstances and historical whims of her story, it is surprising that the novel is not a tragedy. It does not become so because of the silent strength of the title character, Obasan. She holds the keys to the past, to which Naomi must reconcile herself. She is finally successful in an epiphanic ending-a sudden revelation-as she embraces and is embraced by the Canadian landscape.

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Author Biography

Born in Vancouver, Canada, in 1935 as the daughter of Lois (Yao) and Rev. Gordon Goichi Nakayama, Joy Kogawa is a poet, essayist, novelist, and a Nisei-a second-generation Japanese Canadian. When World War II broke out, she, like the rest of her family, was forced from the coast. Canada and its allies were at war with Germany, Italy, and Japan and regarded Canadians of Japanese heritage with suspicion. Due to these circumstances, Kogawa bad to attend grade school in the internment camp at Slocan, British Columbia. Her 1981 autobiographical novel, *Obasan,* relates her life as a Canadian during World War II. The novel is the first, in Canadian letters, to deal with this painful time and bas won several awards. In that novel Kogawa makes peace with the injustice of the internment of herself and others whose ancestors originated in Japan. Her novel also reflects the anti-nuclear movement as well as the growing effort to seek redress for the treatment of Japanese-Canadians in World War II.

Because internment did not end with the war, Kogawa went on to school in Coaldale, Alberta. She then entered the university system and attended the University of Alberta, Toronto Conservatory of Music, the Anglican Women's Training College, and the University of Saskatchewan. In 1951, she married David Kogawa and had two children. Kogawa and her husband were divorced in 1968. From 1914 to 1916, Kogawa worked as a staff writer for the Office of the Prime Minister. In 1918. she was writer in residence at the University of Ottawa.

Before her autobiographical novel, Kogawa was, and remains, a well-regarded poet. Her first collection, published in 1961, *The Splintered Moon,* reflected upon her marriage. Her next three collections reflected upon the same themes found in *Obasan.* She wrote of living a hybrid life as a Japanese-Canadian Nisei; divorce; an abortion in 1911; deaths in her family. specifically her uncle and mother; the silence of Obasan, her aunt; and the militancy of women seeking justice and redress. Her recent collection of poetry, *Woman* in *the Woods* (1985), is her most balanced and refined collection to date.

Plot Summary

Chapters 1-10

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* centers on the memories and experiences of Naomi Nakane, a schoolteacher living in the rural Canadian town of Cecil, Alberta, when the novel begins. The death of Naomi's uncle, with whom she had lived as a child, leads Naomi to visit and care for her widowed aunt Obasan. Her brief stay with Obasan in turn becomes an occasion for Naomi to revisit and reconstruct in memory her painful experiences as a child during and after World War II. Naomi's narration thus interweaves two stories, one of the past and another of the present, mixing experience and recollection, history and memory throughout. Naomi's struggle to come to terms with both past and present confusion and suffering form the core of the novel's plot.

Obasan opens in August, 1972, with a visit by Naomi and her uncle Isamu to the coulee, a shallow grassland ravine to which they return "once every year around this time." Though Naomi seems unaware of it (until the end of the novel), her uncle returns to the "virgin land" of the prairie each year to mark the anniversary of the dropping of an atomic bomb on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

Naomi simply recalls that "the first time Uncle and I came here was in 1954, in August, two months after Aunt Emily's initial visit to Granton." Only at the end of the book does Naomi (and the reader) learn the news that Emily brought on that occasion, in the letters of Grandma Kato, about the suffering of Naomi's mother and grandmother in the aftermath of the Nagasaki bombing.

One month after her visit to the coulee, Naomi learns of her uncle's death. In the days following her return to Granton to attend to her aunt, Naomi tries to communicate with Obasan, to understand the silent "language of her grief," to penetrate a silence that "has grown large and powerful" over the years. At the same time, Naomi sifts through the documents, newspaper clippings, letters, and diaries kept by her aunt Emily, an outspoken political activist determined to air the truth about the Japanese-Canadian experience of persecution. That experience, recounted in *Obasan* largely through Naomi's memories of childhood, is rooted in the actual history of 20,000 Japanese Canadians (and 120,000 Japanese Americans). Viewed as a dangerous enemy during World War II, many of these individuals were stripped of their homes and possessions, compelled to relocate to ghost towns or concentration camps, forced to live and work under terrible conditions, and generally denied the rights of citizenship. Throughout *Obasan,* Naomi's quest to understand the painful personal story of her childhood intersects this larger communal history of suffering.

Between the influences of her two aunts, one suffering in silence, the other a "word warrior," Naomi feels driven to review her life as a child in all of its mystery, confusion, and pain Naomi's recollections come to her in isolated phrases, scenes, stories, dreams, and fairy tales. A photograph of herself as a child with her mother, given to her

by Obasan, prompts Naomi to remember her childhood home in Vancouver and the idyllic life it contained before her family was broken up and evacuated from the West coast.

Naomi recalls steaming-hot baths with Grandma Kato, evenings spent in the family's music room, and bedtime stories told "night after night."

Chapters 11-23

But as the stories of Naomi's childhood unfold, the sources of her confusion and pain emerge. Repeated incidents of sexual abuse by a neighbor, Old Man Gower, produce feelings of shame and confusion in young Naomi that seem to separate her from her mother for the first time. When her mother leaves on a trip to Japan, Naomi feels "an ominous sense of cold and absence," uncertain if her own wrongdoing caused her mother to "disappear." Finally, Naomi is troubled as a child by the growing racial tension that threatens the rest of her family with evacuation and internment, the "riddle" that made them "both the enemy and not the enemy."

When the evacuation commences and Naomi's father and uncle are ordered to report to work camps, Naomi, her brother Stephen, and Obasan board a train from Vancouver to the mountainous interior of British Columbia. In the ghost town of Slocan, Naomi and her surrogate family, along with many other relocated Japanese Canadians, attempt to reconstruct family and community life. In the face of tremendous obstacles, they succeed at least partially. Slocan comes alive, after a time, with new small businesses, new social ties, worship services and schools, and Naomi enjoys "Sunday-school outings, Christmas concerts, sports days, [and] hikes" with new-found friends. But life in Slocan is not free of suffering and confusion for Naomi. In the hospital, after being saved from drowning by Rough Lock Bill, Naomi dreams of all the brutishness and death that she has witnessed since leaving Vancouver. Her hallucinatory dream leads her to understand that "Death comes to the world in many unexpected places," even in the restored community of Slocan.

Chapters 24-39

After several years in Slocan, Naomi and Stephen are overjoyed by the end of the war and the unexpected arrival of their father But their hopes for a reunited family and a return to their former life are short-lived. Their father is once again dispatched to a work camp, where he later dies before seeing his children again. Meanwhile, Uncle, Obasan, Stephen and Naomi are "relocated" to a sugar-beet farm in the harsh climate of the Canadian plains. On the Barker farm outside of Granton, Alberta, they struggle to survive under conditions far worse than those in Slocan, without the consolations of community that Slocan had allowed. Eventually, Uncle and Obasan manage to leave the Barker farm and move to a house in Granton, where they remain after Stephen pursues a career in music and Naomi becomes a teacher.

It is this home in Granton to which Naomi returns after her uncle's death to care for Obasan. And it is also in Obasan's home, more than twenty-seven years after the bombing of Nagasaki, that Naomi finally learns the truth about her mother's suffering and the reasons for her silence. Naomi and Stephen had been spared of this knowledge by the wishes of their mother, who asked that the truth be kept secret "for the sake of the children" ("Kodomo no tame"). Even as an adult, Naomi is shielded from the truth, by Uncle (at the coulee), by Obasan (who gives her pictures in place of answers), and by Aunt Emily:

"What do you think happened to Mother and Grandma in Japan?" I asked "Did they starve, do you think?"
Aunt Emily's startle was so swift and subtle it barely registered. But I could feel that somewhere, beneath her eyes, a shutter had clicked open and shut at my mentioning Mother and Grandma It was as if my unexpected question was a sudden beam of pain that had to be extinguished immediately.
She stared into the blackness. Sometimes when I stand in a prairie night the emptiness draws me irresistibly, like a dust speck into a vacuum cleaner, and I can imagine myself disappearing off into space like a rocket with my questions trailing behind me.

When, finally, the remnants of her family are reunited to mourn the death of her uncle, Naomi receives answers to the questions that have trailed behind her throughout her life. At Naomi's pleading, Nakayama-sensei reads the letters sent many years before by Grandma Kato, letters that Naomi had seen and touched but could not translate herself. The letters tell tales of horror, of unbearable experiences and unthinkable memories, and they explain the enduring silence, the "voicelessness," that has tormented Naomi since her mother left her as a child. Although the horror of her mother's fate allows no easy reconciliation with the past or with the powers that brought on that fate, Naomi finally understands that her mother's silence was inspired by her attempt to protect and love her children, not abandon or punish them. At the end of *Obasan,* Naomi returns to the coulee that she had visited each year with her uncle, now aware of the significance of his ritual and able to embrace the past in peace, to put aside "this body of grief," to recognize that "the song of mourning is not a lifelong song."

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Summary

Obasan is Joy Kogawa's autobiographical novel of her memories of life as a Japanese Canadian growing up in the 1940's and 1950's. Kogawa's novel explores the horrors of the internment of thousands of Japanese Canadian people during World War II, as well as her emotional catharsis, as she comes to terms with her own personal history.

As the novel opens, it is August of 1972 and a woman named Naomi Nakane is visiting an open field near Granton, Alberta, Canada. Naomi is accompanied by her elderly uncle, Isamu Nakane, with whom she has made the pilgrimage to this spot for eighteen years. Naomi keeps her silence, as her uncle sits cross-legged in the tall grass meditating, as he does during each visit.

A few weeks later, Naomi is involved in a discussion in her classroom with her students about the probability of her marriage, as she quietly speculates on her single status. Naomi recalls the only date she has had in quite a while with the widowed father of one of her students asked her out but never called again after their ill-fated dinner date. Naomi is thirty-six years-old and has become comfortable with her independent status, although she is bored with teaching and wishes she could retire.

Naomi's thoughts are interrupted by a phone call from a physician telling Naomi that her Uncle Isamu has died. Naomi makes arrangements to take a few days' leave and drives to Granton to be with her Uncle Isamu's wife and her aunt, Obasan.

Naomi unintentionally startles Aunt Obasan upon entering the elderly woman's home. Aunt Obasan is nearly deaf and is seated with her head lowered when Naomi approaches her. Naomi does not embrace her aunt, though, as she knows the woman is uncomfortable with touch. Naomi catches sight of a loaf of bread sitting on the cupboard indicating that Uncle Isamu had been baking shortly before he died. Naomi and her brother, Stephen, called this hard bread "stone bread" when they were children, but Uncle Isamu persisted in making it for many years.

Aunt Obasan attempts to tell Naomi the details of Uncle Isamu's death and haltingly tells Naomi that Uncle Isamu had called out in the night, but she never fully understood what happened to her husband. The nurses at the hospital sent Aunt Obasan home. The last time she saw Uncle Isamu alive, he was lying in bed speechless. Naomi considers Aunt Obasan's future and momentarily contemplates bringing the elderly woman home to live with her, but she knows that her aunt will never leave her little house packed with memories.

Naomi thinks about her brother, Stephen, who moved from their small Canadian town as soon as he was able in favor of large, cosmopolitan areas. An old family photograph prompts Naomi's thoughts about her parents and grandparents, all dead now. Naomi's

paternal grandparents, the Nakanes, were close to her maternal grandparents, the Katos, even though Naomi questions the sense of closeness between her Grandfather Kato and Grandmother Kato. Grandmother Kato would frequently return to Japan for extended visits taking Naomi's mother and leaving her other daughter, Emily, with Grandfather Kato in Canada. Grandfather Nakane had been called a "number one boatbuilder" for his prowess and became very prosperous in his boat shop on Saltspring Island. Uncle Isamu and his mother came to live with Grandfather and Grandmother Nakane, when his own father died. Uncle Isamu likewise adopted the trade of boatbuilding and married Aunt Obasan, when they were in their thirties.

The marriage of Naomi's own parents had been the first one not to be arranged in their community but the Katos and the Nakanes eventually adapted to the idea and embraced the marriage and the grandchildren. Naomi's Aunt Emily has never married and spends her life as an advocate for political and social causes especially related to the public acknowledgement of the atrocities inflicted on people of Japanese heritage during World War II in Canada.

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Analysis

The story's setting is in Alberta, Canada, in the 1970's as current activity and the 1940's through memories and flashbacks. The story is told through the first person perspective of the narrator, Naomi Nakane, who eventually views her life and her family's heritage through the silent grief of her Aunt Obasan. The author writes that "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." Aunt Obasan has absorbed the pains and grief over many years without verbalizing her anguish, as she symbolizes the group of disposed Japanese Canadians during the period of World War II.

The theme of ancestry and heritage is an important one in the story and Naomi uses the scene of viewing a family photograph to foreshadow the importance of family and the dissolution of the unit due to evil and negative forces.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 Summary

Naomi spends the night in Aunt Obasan's home and is awakened when Aunt Obasan enters Naomi's room on her way to the attic. Naomi accompanies Aunt Obasan to the attic to assist the elderly woman in her search for an item which she does not identify for Naomi. Sifting through layers of dust and cobwebs, Aunt Obasan continues her search for the item while Naomi waits patiently. Aunt Obasan is frustrated when she does not find what she had hoped to but does locate Uncle Isamu's identification card and takes that with her, when she and Naomi leave the attic.

After this impromptu nocturnal search, Naomi has a disturbing dream about people enduring forced labor under the watchful eyes of a British officer and a robotic dog. Uncle Isamu also appears in the dream doing a ritual death dance, but he is abruptly intercepted by the officer. When Naomi awakens she is disoriented, but the reality of her uncle's death brings her back to the present.

At breakfast, Aunt Obasan shares with Naomi the items, which she thought, had been in the attic. The package includes notes, document, journals and other works written by Naomi's Aunt Emily. Naomi is as uncomfortable with the papers as she is with Aunt Emily and her unrelenting cause of bringing awareness about the plight of the Nisei, the Canadian children of non-naturalized Japanese people living in Canada. Naomi recalls Aunt Emily's last visit and the intensity with which she wanted to impart her knowledge and information to Naomi who prefers to live quietly in acceptance of the past.

While sifting through the package of papers, Naomi finds documentation related to the seizure of her family's property including the boats with which they earned their living during the mid-1940's. Naomi again recalls a conversation with Aunt Emily in which Aunt Emily calls for radical rejuvenation of the past, while Naomi would prefer to focus on the present and the future. Aunt Obasan never commented.

Naomi turns her attention to Aunt Emily's diary and reads the first entry addressed to "Dearest Nesan," which Naomi knows had been written to her mother, Aunt Emily's older sister. The reference to her mother raises Naomi's emotions, as she puts the diary aside only to be plunged in memory again when Aunt Obasan presents Naomi with an old photograph of Naomi clinging to her mother's leg.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 Analysis

The author uses the techniques of memory, flashbacks and dreams to help tell the story. This allows the author the ability to add substance and content creatively without burdening the narrative with long passages of explanation. This is especially important in a historical novel which relies on information from the past to make the present relevant.

The author also uses the techniques of irony and sarcasm in the story when she contrasts Naomi's perception of the past with that of Aunt Emily and Aunt Obasan. Naomi prefers to focus on the future while her aunts, especially Aunt Emily, are riveted in the past due to the sense of Japanese heritage and also the outrage stemming from the gross injustices inflicted on these people. Naomi has the advantage of having been very young during the mid-1940's, so the pain is not as vibrant for her.

This vantage point allows her to view the situation with a cooler perspective. For example, when Naomi finds a note among Aunt Emily's documents from a supervisor named "B. Good," informing the Japanese National people that they must surrender their property, Naomi interprets it in her own way. "Be good, my undesirable, my illegitimate children, be obedient, be servile, above all don't send me any letter of inquiry about your homes, while I stand on guard (over your property) in the true north strong, though you are not free. B. Good." Playing off the official's name, Naomi devises the ironic, but true meaning of the note telling the Japanese victims to "be good," in spite of the fact that they have been stripped of their possessions.

Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13

Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 Summary

When viewing the photograph, Naomi is struck by the way both she and her mother do not look directly at the camera. Naomi remembers observing her mother adopting this same behavior in public because it was considered too forward to look at anyone directly. Naomi also remembers her Grandmother Kato's large beautiful home and the time she spent there with her family. Naomi is too little yet, but her mother, father and brother all play musical instruments and sing and the house is filled with lovely sounds. Naomi returns the picture to Obasan with a melancholy feeling that she can resurrect only fragments of her past.

With her memory primed, Naomi begins to recall more childhood events, especially the times when her mother would tell her stories. Overall, Naomi recalls a pleasant, comfortable childhood raised by just, loving parents and, later on, Aunt Emily confirms that Naomi was a quiet child who never spoke but never cried either.

Naomi also remembers the fragility of life outside her protective home environment. One incident in particular stays in her mind as especially unnerving even though she is unable to voice her fear. In the backyard of their home sits a wire cage for a hen and chicks which Naomi's mother tends. One day, the hen begins to ruthlessly peck at the chicks, until Naomi can silently summon her mother who removes the chicks, both dead and alive, to stop the trauma. Naomi remembers her mother's calm and lack of blaming Naomi or even the hen for the incident. In her mother's eyes, things are as they are and there is no point in affixing blame. This feeling of comfort with her mother engenders a closeness that is unspoken on the part of mother and daughter.

The only thing that Naomi's mother does not know is the perverse situation inflicted on Naomi by their neighbor Old Mr. Gower. From the time that she is only four-years-old, Old Mr. Gower entices Naomi into his home and approaches her and touches her inappropriately, threatening her with public exposure, which to Naomi's cultural code is more dishonorable than the acts perpetrated by Old Mr. Gower. The secrets kept about Old Mr. Gower begin to drive an invisible wedge between Naomi and her family and Naomi is even further removed emotionally, when she eventually goes willingly to Old Mr. Gower's home.

To complicate the emotional distancing at this time, Naomi's mother and Grandmother Kato leave for Japan to care for Naomi's ailing Great Grandmother. Naomi cannot voice her fears but wonders why this sick old woman should have more of her mother's attentions than she should. Naomi secretly plans for her mother's return and imagines scenarios, where she will please her mother with little gifts and surprises. The absence of Naomi's mother changes the family's mood and the house does not seem as happy even though Aunt Obasan moves in to help Naomi's father care for Naomi and Stephen.

Naomi's feelings of fear and longing for her mother are exacerbated by the anguish of the adults who must now adhere to curfews and blackouts due to wartime procedures. Even Stephen is suffering from the effects of the outside world, when he is harassed and beaten by children at school who accuse him of being a Japanese enemy. Even though their father confirms that Naomi and Stephen are both natural Canadians, the insinuations and threats continue and life is never the same again.

Naomi begins to wonder if her mother will ever return as the weeks turn into months. The family tries to make up for the absence of the children's mother and lavishes Christmas and New Year's gifts on them. Even though he is present, Naomi's father is ill and becoming more and more emotionally distant with the children. Naomi senses that her father's loneliness stems from more than her mother's absence, as she soon notes that her father's friends no longer visit, so he stays in his study in the basement most of the time.

One evening, Naomi overhears her father speaking to Aunt Emily who is clearly in an agitated state. Naomi hears Aunt Emily talk about Grandfather Nakane being in the Sick Bay and his precarious position there when all the others leave. At Naomi's young age, she does not understand that Sick Bay is not a harbor but a hospital where people of Japanese heritage are kept in internment. Aunt Emily's ranting about the intolerable conditions for those interned is interrupted by Stephen, who warns Aunt Emily about the evening curfew. Aunt Emily scurries out the back door and heads to her own home to avoid the police.

Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 Analysis

The connection between Naomi and her mother is the important theme in this section. As a young child, Naomi does not speak yet her mother can intuit Naomi's needs and feelings without question and never chastises Naomi or acts in frustration for her lack of communication. This forges an important bond between mother and daughter which begins to unnaturally erode due to Old Mr. Gower's nefarious presence in Naomi's life. Naomi believes that her mother is the strongest person in her world, even stronger than Naomi's father is.

For example, when Old Mr. Gower agrees to hide Naomi's father's things should Naomi's father be sent away to an internment camp, Naomi has two fears that Old Mr. Gower is in their home, and that her father may be leaving her too. Naomi believes that, "If my mother were back, she would move aside all the darkness with her hands and we would be safe and at home in our home."

The Japanese cultural code of the importance of honor becomes prominent in this section too. Naomi learns much about honor from her mother who never punishes her children, never looks directly at people, because it is too invasive and never chastises Naomi for not speaking and voicing her thoughts and fears. Naomi intuitively learns from her mother and understands, even at a very young age, that honor takes

precedence over personal pain and Naomi buries her emotional fears and pain from the child abuse inflicted by Old Mr. Gower.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Soon after, Naomi learns the true meaning of Sick Bay as well as the meaning of a place called the Pool which is not a swimming area but rather a holding place for Japanese nationals in Vancouver from where they will be shipped off to work or roads or to concentration camps further inland. Many Japanese national families proactively leave their homes in British Columbia to take up residence in abandoned mining towns called ghost towns, where there are none of the aspects of city life with which they are familiar. However, they can also be free from persecution and hard labor.

The narrative returns to the present day and Aunt Emily has called Naomi at Aunt Obasan's home to tell her that she and Stephen will be arriving later tonight. While Aunt Obasan naps, Naomi returns to Aunt Emily's papers and finds a diary in which Aunt Emily had written letters to Naomi's mother. The purpose of the diary is to provide Naomi's mother with information about the family's experiences while she is in Japan. The first entry is on December 25, 1941 and Aunt Emily's words speak of the precarious state of the family in wartime.

In addition to their fears during blackouts, the Japanese people are being relieved of their household possessions and their jobs, especially the fishermen whose boats have been seized. Most of the small businesses owned by Japanese people have been closed down because the other citizens fear of shopping and dining in their establishments. Aunt Emily takes special offense to the media's use of the term "Japs" to describe the Canadian Japanese people and will wage her battles on this issue for the remainder of her life.

Aunt Emily's next entry into the diary informs her sister that the Japanese men who are not Canadian citizens are being rounded up by the hundreds and imprisoned. The family entertains ideas of leaving Vancouver but is not familiar with any other areas and remains in the city for the present. Aunt Emily continues to be outraged by the media portrayal of Japanese nationals, even the small children, as spies and threats to Canadian security.

Soon, Aunt Emily's entries speak of restrictions of movement within British Columbia and the ever-present fear that any of them or their friends could be apprehended and shipped away without notice. The conditions in the internment camps is appalling with not enough food and no hygiene measures taken for the hundreds of people living in extremely crowded conditions. Naomi's father, Mark, who is a physician, is sent to work on the road crew and Naomi's Uncle Isamu is missing in one of the camps. Eventually, Naomi, Stephen and Aunt Obasan are sent to the ghost town called Slocan and Aunt Emily is separated from them and ends up living in Toronto, Ontario. It will be more than ten years before the family sees Aunt Emily again.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The author uses the interesting technique of diary entries to explain the plight of the Japanese Canadian people from the time period of the end of 1941 to the middle of 1942. Much happened emotionally and physically to these people and the author's treatment of the material covers much material in an engaging manner. This format allows the reader to not only learn the fundamental issues facing the Japanese Canadian people but also to understand the emotional impact and the toll the internment had on the family dynamic.

The theme of silence becomes important in this chapter even though Aunt Emily is the most outspoken member of the family and can barely contain her outrage. It is Aunt Emily's writing that captures the mute desperation and supplication of her family members and all the Japanese Canadians, who are powerless to protest their outrageous circumstances. Aunt Emily is positioned as a foil to the mute nation of people and especially to Aunt Obasan, who bears all things with silence and grace.

Chapters 15, 16 and 17

Chapters 15, 16 and 17 Summary

It is the summer of 1942 when Naomi, Stephen and Aunt Obasan leave Vancouver via train to their exiled destination of Slocan. Stephen's leg is in a cast because an old injury had not healed properly and needed to be re-set. This impediment adds to Stephen's insolence and silent rebellion against being uprooted from his home. Aunt Obasan is too immersed in the Japanese tradition of submission and Naomi is still too young to understand the events, which take her away from her home and her sense of security.

Even in their own distress, Aunt Obasan and another woman on the train give up some food and a petticoat to a young mother weeping in the same train car. Apparently, the child had just been born prematurely and the woman had been ushered off to the exiting train with no food or even a diaper or blanket for her newborn. Naomi watches this exchange in silence and notes the relief on the young mother's face. Naomi returns to playing with a doll she has positioned at the train window so that the doll's staring eyes can witness the passing landscape. Stephen's insolence extends to his refusal of any of Aunt Obasan's food on the train, as he begins to see anything about his cultural heritage as a huge impediment to his life.

The narrative moves ahead twenty years to 1962 when Naomi accompanies Uncle Isamu, Aunt Obasan and Aunt Emily on a trip through British Columbia. The family is amazed that there are no signs or markers indicating that Japanese Canadian people had been virtual prisoners there and even more had been exiled from this region. The family recalls the sagging overgrown hut, which became their home in 1942, until they are exiled once again in 1945.

The story reverts to 1942 and Aunt Obasan, Naomi and Stephen have disembarked from the train and receive the help of Nakayame-sensei, the Anglican minister from their church in Vancouver. Nakayame-sensei and another man named Ojisan assist Aunt Obasan with the family's paltry belongings and they eventually reach the little hut, which is the little family's new home. Naomi is reminded of the story about the seven dwarfs because the ceiling is so low. Aunt Obasan says nothing about her new primitive surroundings.

The next day, the already crowed hut gains another occupant, an elderly woman named Nomura-obasan who is from the town. Again, Aunt Obasan says nothing about the imposition and cheerfully assists the invalid woman in even the most basic of bodily needs. Even Naomi is enlisted into service to the old woman, when Aunt Obasan is not in the hut. Stephen does not get involved and tries to distance himself from his family and the fact that he is of Japanese heritage. The only retreat or comfort that Stephen finds is in his music, as he plays his flute and his mother's favorite phonograph albums on his record player.

Naomi retreats into her own world of fairy tales and stories and likens herself to Goldilocks or Baby Bear. "...there is a story of a child with long golden ringlets called Goldilocks who one day comes to a quaint house in the woods lived in by a family of bears. Clearly, we are that bear family in this strange house in the middle of the woods. I am Baby Bear, whose chair Goldilocks breaks, whose porridge Goldilocks eats, whose bed Goldilocks sleeps in. Or perhaps this is not true and I am really Goldilocks after all. In the morning, will I not find my way out of the forest and back to my room where the picture bird sings above my bed and the real bird sings in the real peach tree by my open bedroom window in Marpole?"

Chapters 15, 16 and 17 Analysis

The author uses many examples of visual imagery to help set the scene and convey the narrator's feelings throughout the novel. In this section, as the little family unit leaves Vancouver in exile, Naomi thinks, "We are leaving the B.C. coast - rain, cloud, mist - an air overladen with weeping. Behind us lies a salty sea within which swim our drowning specks of memory - our small waterlogged eulogies. We are going down to the middle of the earth with pickax eyes, tunneling by train to the interior, carried along by the momentum of the expulsion into the waiting wilderness.... We disappear into the future undemanding as dew."

Obviously, air does not weep and memories cannot swim in salt water but the technique of personification, which gives human characteristics and qualities to inanimate objects, more eloquently explains the scenery and mood than if the author had simply said, "when we left it was really foggy and it was hard leaving our memories behind." To finish that passage, the author uses a simile comparing the Japanese Canadian exile to the silent evaporation of morning dew.

Chapters 18, 19 and 20

Chapters 18, 19 and 20 Summary

Before long, Naomi learns that her Grandmother Nakane has died. It has only been a few weeks since Naomi had seen her paternal grandparents who had arrived by train to also live in Slocan. Grandmother Nakane's illness prohibited their staying so the elderly couple was taken away to another internment camp called New Denver. Naomi learns another lesson in restraint, as she watches her grandparents leave in silence. Aunt Obasan has taught the young Naomi that it is wagamama, or selfish, to think of oneself in spite of the wishes and needs of another and it is not good to burden anyone departing with the weight of a sad goodbye.

Naomi accompanies Aunt Obasan to Grandmother Nakane's wake and funeral and witnesses for the first time the ritual of a funeral pyre. Grandmother Nakane's ashes will be returned to Grandfather Nakane, who is too ill to attend the service. Later that evening, Aunt Obasan delivers food to the mend tending the pyre overnight and returns to the site the next morning to receive the ashes which Grandfather Nakane vows to bury, when the family is allowed to return to Vancouver.

The autumn passes uneventfully and happy news arrives with the winter's first snowfall. Uncle Isamu will be arriving to live with the family in Slocan. Aunt Obasan moves around busily preparing food and setting the table in anticipation of her husband's arrival. Naomi notes that Aunt Obasan has even set out the King George and Queen Elizabeth mugs that her mother had purchased at the time of a royal visit to Vancouver. As the snow continues to fall heavily and there is no sign of Uncle Isamu, Aunt Obasan continues with her work and shows no signs of apprehension.

Finally, Uncle Isamu does arrive at the little hut much to the delight of Stephen and Naomi. Aunt Obasan and Uncle Isamu bow to each other in respect and Uncle Isamu addresses Nomura-obasan acknowledging the hard times that have brought them all together. Uncle Isamu does not give any direct information about Stephen and Naomi's father when prompted by Nomura-obasan and Naomi is filled with more questions. Uncle Isamu has brought two wooden flutes for Stephen, who shows joy for something for the first time in a long while. Soon after Uncle Isamu's arrival, he pulls Stephen on a sled into town to have the cast removed from Stephen's leg.

The arrival of spring has made the little hut almost charming with the growth of flowers and surrounding trees and Uncle Isamu shows Stephen and Naomi how to search for fiddlehead ferns in the woods. Stephen and Naomi have been without formal education during their exile but begin to attend school in May of 1943 in Slocan. All the teachers and students at their school are Japanese and the white children attend a separate school.

Naomi is glad to have new friends and one day two classmates, a boy named Kenji and a girl named Miyuki come to Naomi's house for a visit. The children explore the surrounding woods with its resident critters and insects and Miyuki suddenly exclaims at the sight of a large swooping shadow, which Kenji declares must have been the King bird. "If you tell lies," Kenji says, "the King bird cuts your tongue in half and you can't talk. That's what it did to the birds. All they can say now is 'twit twit.'" Before she falls asleep that night, Naomi wonders about the lies the King bird has heard today.

Chapters 18, 19 and 20 Analysis

The author uses the shadow of the King bird to symbolize the shadow which has fallen over the lives of Naomi and the other Japanese children living in exile. The legend of the King bird is that it will cut off the tongue of anyone telling a lie and, ironically, the children believe that this applies to them when it should be directed to the adult world in general and more specifically to the elders in Naomi's world, whose silence about her parents is a lie. Stephen can process the situation and make presumptions, but the younger Naomi is unaware of the deceptions of the adults.

There is also symbolism in the arrival of spring in which Naomi comes to life with the arrival of school and new friends. After so much loss and grief, the little family welcomes the season, hoping that it will be the harbinger of better times for their dwindling family.

The author also uses the technique of foreshadowing when Uncle Isamu brings the flutes to Stephen who emerges from his insolence to embrace music again. This act will dramatically impact the course of Stephen's life which will be revealed later in the story.

BOOKRAGS

Chapters 21, 22 and 23

Chapters 21, 22 and 23 Summary

The following week Naomi accompanies Kenji on another adventure and they end up at a lake close to the home of a local eccentric named Rough Lock Bill. As Kenji and Naomi play on the beach, they are approached by the crotchety Rough Lock Bill who wants to know who Kenji's friend is. Naomi is awed by the man's rough demeanor and is barely able to whisper her name. Eventually, Naomi realizes that Rough Lock Bill means her no harm, as he tells Kenji and Naomi a story about the founding of Slocan by Native Indians.

When Rough Lock Bill walks back to his house, Kenji and Naomi climb onto Kenji's rough-hewn raft. The normally timid Naomi rejects her aunt and uncle's warnings about going into the water in favor of this adventure with Kenji. Despite Kenji's promise to not go out too far, the raft drifts further out into the water and Kenji is tossed overboard, as he struggles to control the craft. Kenji swims back to shore leaving Naomi alone on the raft, as she watches Kenji run home knowing that he will not return for her. Naomi, who cannot swim, is forced to jump into the water and try to make it to shore instead of drifting further out. Naomi struggles and thrashes in the water and is soon rescued by Rough Lock Bill, who takes her to his home to recover from her traumatic experience.

The last thing Naomi remembers, as she awakens in a hospital room, is being held close by Rough Lock Bill, who has become her new champion. Aunt Obasan is here and has brought Naomi's second grade reader from which Naomi reads, as a nurse tries to detangle Naomi's matted hair. Stephen tells Naomi that both Grandfather Nakane and their father are in a hospital in New Denver and Stephen tries to console Naomi by telling her that their father is not going to die.

Naomi thinks about death, which seems to surround her, especially in the hospital environment. She recalls the incident where a hen pecked to death several chicks in their backyard in Vancouver. Naomi muses that chickens must always be aware of death because of their fidgety movements every time a shadow of a plane, or the King bird passes overhead. Naomi also remembers an event from the previous week, when some boys from school tortured a chicken just to watch it die. Not long after that, Naomi encounters a girl on a path near the skating rink and Naomi can hear the tortured mewing of a cat, which has fallen into the outhouse. The cat's sounds continue for a few days, until Naomi reasons that the cat has expired in the filth of its prison. Naomi dreams of the tortured cat, the nurse pulling at her hair and a British doctor whose manner is less than comforting.

When Naomi is released from the hospital she finds that Nomura-obasan has moved out to live with her daughter's family, leaving more room for Naomi's little family. The balance of the year is very pleasant for Stephen and Naomi who assimilate more into the social aspects of Slocan especially the public bathhouse where all the residents

engage in the therapeutic benefits of the hot water. On one occasion, Aunt Obasan and Naomi go to the baths together and Naomi is taunted by two girls, who claim that Naomi's family has tuberculosis. Naomi is offended by this insult and is quite shamed at the thought of anyone in her family having such an illness.

Chapters 21, 22 and 23 Analysis

The author uses regional and cultural language patterns to further identify the differences between some of the characters. For example, Rough Lock Bill, who is a White Canadian, speaks in the typical dialect of people in the Alberta region. When Rough Lock Bill encounters the silent Naomi, he says," Can't read. Can't talk. What's the good of you, eh?" When Rough Lock Bill asks Kenji a question about a sand sculpture, he says, "What have I got her, eh, Ken?" Canadian people typically add the "eh" sound to their questions as if to accentuate the tone.

In other parts of the novel, the author uses the Japanese language especially with the characters of Uncle Isamu, Aunt Obasan and the older characters for whom the language is more firmly rooted. For example, when Nakayama-sensei prays with the family and their friends, he uses a mix of Japanese and English phrases. "Zenno no Kami you subete no hito no kokoro wa Shu ni araware... Amen. I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth - miyuru mono to miezaru mono no tsukurinushi o shinzu..."

This section is also anti-climactic for the plot, as Naomi's childhood will soon be over and she will begin to sort through some of the obscure answers and evasions the adults have provided to her questions over the years. To accentuate Naomi's relatively pleasant experience in the house in the woods during this period, the author indicates Naomi's interest in fairy tales and juvenile stories, such as *Heidi* and *Little Men.*

Chapters 24, 25 and 26

Chapters 24, 25 and 26 Summary

A few months later, Naomi awakens one morning with the feeling that her mother is attempting to communicate with her. It is August of 1945 and there is a feeling of lightness in the little hut and Naomi discovers when she rises that her father has joined them. The day before, Stephen had run home with the announcement that the war was over, but the look on their father's face this morning does not indicate that any joy is imminent for the family.

Stephen is the one who informs Naomi that the family must move again and that they will not be going back to Vancouver even though the war is over. Naomi and Stephen's father is to report to New Denver, while the children are to travel with Uncle Isamu and Aunt Obasan to a town called Granton in the province of Alberta. The family is instructed to leave all furnishings behind so they begin to pack their wooden boxes with only their kitchenware, bedding and personal effects.

One day Naomi's father is gone without warning and soon the rest of the little family is boarded onto a train for the trip to their next place of exile. Naomi thinks about the last time the family made a trip like this, as she wonders about things in Vancouver and whether they will ever return.

Chapters 24, 25 and 26 Analysis

The author uses visual imagery and foreshadowing in the scene where Naomi senses her mother. "She is here. She is not here. She is reaching out to me with a touch deceptive as down, with hands and fingers that wave like grass around my feet and her hair falls and falls and falls from her head like streamers of paper rain. She is a maypole woman to whose apron-string streamers I cling and around whose skirts I dance. She is a ship leaving the harbor, tied to me by colored paper streamers that break and fall into a swirling wake."

There is also foreshadowing a little later when Stephen accidentally breaks his mother's favorite phonograph record entitled "Silver Threads Among the Gold." These scenarios will have more meaning at the end of the novel, when Naomi and Stephen discover what happened to their mother in Japan in August of 1945.

The author uses visual imagery too as in the scene where Aunt Obasan packs the dishes in the comic papers. It is ironic to imagine this quiet, dignified woman preparing for exile once more by wrapping her house wares in comics when the situation is far from humorous.

The author likes to use language, both dialogue and description and uses onomatopoeia when she describes the sound of the train. "Clackity-clack, clackity-clack,

clackity clack, so long, Slocan." Onomatopoeia is the spelling of words by using the sounds that they make or describe and it is easy to hear the sounds that Naomi hears, as the train leaves Slocan.

Chapters 27, 28 and 29

Chapters 27, 28 and 29 Summary

The narrative returns to present day and Naomi considers reading Aunt Emily's papers once more but is interrupted by details related to Uncle Isamu's funeral. Naomi is weary of the burden of Aunt Emily's words and outrage over so many years and Naomi struggles with the purpose of digging up the past continually. Naomi thinks back to a conversation with Aunt Emily several years ago about the repatriation of Japanese Canadians which essentially destroyed so many families. Naomi herself admits that she has not kept in contact with anyone from the days in exile and feels fragmented in some ways by the gaps in her personal history. Aunt Emily knows of only one person who ever returned to Vancouver and no one who successfully recovered any possessions. Naomi likens Aunt Emily's "words, all her papers, the telegrams and petitions, are like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity, scaly claws hard at work. But what good they do, I do not know - those little black typewritten words - rain words, cloud droppings."

The narrative reverts to the family's exile in 1945 when they end up living in an abandoned chicken shack on the property of a farmer named Mr. Barker. The only element in the building is a wood stove standing in the middle of the room. That night the wind howls and beats against the little shack and Aunt Obasan stuffs rags in the cracks of the door and walls, while the family tries to sleep on blankets laid on the floor.

The story turns again to the present day and Naomi notices an article from an Alberta newspaper about the success of the beet harvest in 1945 due to the efforts of the Japanese evacuees. This article has jagged Naomi's memory about living and working on the Barkers' beet farm and Naomi recalls the horrific summer heat, where she nearly faints while working in the field and the bitter winters, where the family barely survives and eats whole cloves of garlic to stay warm at night.

Chapters 27, 28 and 29 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique of a metaphor to describe the slow, painful revelations Naomi experiences as she delves into Aunt Emily's documents. "Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all." Obviously, Naomi's scalp cannot be cut by a file folder, but it is the information contained within them which is a sharp, painful truth for Naomi, who is awakening to the reality of the plight experienced by her family and thousands of others.

The author also successfully moves back and forth in time in this section from the year 1945 to the present and then back again. This technique allows Naomi to more directly relate the events she experienced with the horrific events experienced by the Japanese Canadian people.

Chapters 30, 31, 32 and 33

Chapters 30, 31, 32 and 33 Summary

Naomi considers the years spent on the Barker farm as sleepwalk years because they were so difficult and trying for the entire family, as she has tried to obliterate them from her memory. Even though the war is over, there is still no word from Naomi's mother or grandmother from Japan and a letter from Naomi's father informs the family that Grandfather Nakane died of a heart attack shortly after the family left Slocan. Stephen and Naomi attend school in Granton and are verbally harassed by their classmates because they are of Japanese heritage. Most of the other Japanese Canadian children and especially Stephen, reject Japanese culture and alter their names to sound more conventional.

Naomi frequents a swamp area on the farm in order to have some privacy and enjoy nature after the blazing sun has set. One evening, Stephen rides his bike to tell Naomi to come home because Nakayama-sensei is at the house. When Stephen and Naomi enter the house, Nakayama-sensei is praying and the atmosphere is very still. "I am not sure, as I remember the scene, whether I am told after I come in, or later at night when I am in bed, or if I am even told at all. It's possible the words are never said outright. I know that for years I simply do not believe it." Naomi's last letter to her father has gone unanswered, as she intuitively understands that he is dead but never admits it.

In 1951, the family moves to their own house in Granton which is huge compared to the chicken coop they had inhabited for almost six years. Naomi and Stephen are both in high school and Stephen has blossomed by living in town and having access to music teachers and concerts. Neither Stephen nor Naomi know anything more about their mother and grandmother in Japan and Stephen assumes they are dead or they would have tried to contact them before this time. Naomi cannot give up hope and seeks help from Aunt Emily who echoes Stephen's thoughts that the women must be dead.

Naomi finds two letters indicating that her mother and grandmother did survive the war but that her grandmother has been denied reentry into Canada because she is a Japanese citizen. Naomi's mother has been granted approval to return but the little child she has adopted cannot come and Naomi imagines that her mother will not leave the child alone and return to Canada.

After Stephen graduates high school, he moves to Toronto to live with Aunt Emily so that he can study music in the city. Stephen's innate musical talents propel him to great success, as he even travels internationally performing piano concerts. Stephen distances himself from the family emotionally too and very rarely communicates with them, rejecting his Japanese culture as much as possible.

Naomi recalls one of Aunt Emily's visits to the house in Granton during this time and overhearing Aunt Emily telling Uncle Isamu and Aunt Obasan that the children should

be told. Naomi's curiosity reveals the sight of Aunt Emily crying and praying as she holds some letters which now reside in Aunt Emily's folder of documentation.

Chapters 30, 31, 32 and 33 Analysis

Ironically, at a time when most girls are enjoying their high school years, Naomi is surrounded by death, fear and loss. "The sadness and the absence are like a long winter storm, the snow falling in an unrelieved colorlessness that settles and freezes, burying me beneath a growing monochromatic weight. Something dead is happening, like the weeds that are left to bleach and wither in the sun." The author once more uses visual imagery of similes and metaphors related to nature to describe Naomi's feelings and perceptions of her world.

The story is nearing its climax as the present day Naomi recalls the conversation where Aunt Emily advises Uncle Isamu to tell the children the truth. Naomi's childhood has consisted of an unending series of loss, fear, exile, half truths and obscurity due to the political situation in Canada and to her family's reticence to offend or be too honest. Sometimes evasion is the same as lying and Naomi is moving toward this conclusion.

Chapters 34, 35, 36, 37, 38 and 39

Chapters 34, 35, 36, 37, 38 and 39 Summary

The narrative turns once again to the present and Mr. Barker and his new young wife have come to call on Aunt Obasan to extend their condolences over the death of Uncle Isamu. The meeting is awkward, at best, especially since Aunt Obasan cannot hear any of the conversation and Naomi is forced to carry the social load. Naomi takes offense to the Barkers' comments such as "It was a terrible business what we did to our Japanese," "My daughter has a darling Japanese friend," and "Have you ever been back to Japan?" Naomi has adopted Aunt Emily's zeal for being called a Canadian and bristles at these slights yet Aunt Obasan still putters around in her nearly silent world and serves the visitors tea.

Later in the evening, Nakayama-sensei arrives at the same time as Stephen and Aunt Emily. Nakayama-sensei is making a condolence call but the tone of the visit changes when he sees the letters which Aunt Obasan is reading. After reading portions of the letters himself, Nakayama-sensei asks if the children have been informed yet. Finally, Aunt Obasan gives consent for Stephen and Naomi to learn of the contents of the letters sent by their Grandmother Kato.

Nakayama-sensei reads the two letters aloud and advises Stephen and Naomi to listen for their mother's voice as she speaks through what he is about to read. The first letter informs Grandfather Kato that Grandmother Kato, Stephen and Naomi's mother and Grandmother Kato's niece's daughter were the only ones in the family to survive the war.

The second letter is dated simply 1949 and sent from somewhere in Nagasaki, Japan. Grandmother Kato relays the scenario of their visit to a niece's home in Nagasaki when the American allies dropped an atomic bomb on the city in August of 1945. All but three of the family died as a result of the explosion. Grandmother Kato finds the niece's small child and eventually locates Naomi and Stephen's mother who has been horribly disfigured and scarred. Naomi and Stephen's mother asked Grandmother Kato to not reveal what had happened to spare them the emotional torment. Eventually, Naomi and Stephen's mother adopted the niece's baby who looked so much like Naomi as a toddler but their mother dies soon after.

Naomi addresses her mother and tries to remember their relationship of so many years ago. Even though her mother's voice has long been silenced, Naomi has heard her mother speaking to her in all the places and times of her life. Naomi is also struck by the cultural code of silence which her mother wishes to be enforced. Even in this horrific event, Naomi's mother does not want to further burden Naomi with the weight of the grief.

Naomi is unable to sleep that night and rises before dawn to see Aunt Obasan engaged in a mourning ritual. Naomi feels the need for a grief ritual of her own and drives to the open field where she visited with her uncle just a month before. Naomi gazes over the landscape and envisions Uncle Isamu sitting in his usual spot on the hilltop and hears him in her mind telling her, "Umi no yo," "It's like the sea." Naomi's gaze then falls on the wildflowers dotting the banks of a nearby stream, as she is delighted by their sweet perfume.

Chapters 34, 35, 36, 37, 38 and 39 Analysis

At last, the code of silence is broken and Naomi learns her family's horrible secret about the death of her mother and grandmother. Ironically, it is the attempt to shield Naomi and Stephen from pain which ultimately does deep harm. The code of the Japanese people is strong and honorable but to a young girl with a foot in that culture as well as the Canadian way of life, Naomi struggles with the veil of secrecy and would have preferred honesty to the cover up which has created even bigger scars.

Aunt Emily serves as a foil to the entire aspect of Japanese culture throughout the book as she strives for honesty both within the family and on the political scene. At the end of the book, Aunt Emily wins at least one of her battles when Stephen and Naomi learn the truth. Even Aunt Obasan relents to the value of the truth at the end as evidenced by her producing Aunt Emily's letters as soon as Uncle Isamu has died.

The significance of the book's title stems not only from the steady presence of the character of Aunt Obasan but also for the quiet strength represented by the Japanese people she symbolizes. The code of silence symbolized by Aunt Obasan's quiet ways and later on her deafness, is inherent in the lives of the Japanese people who do not want to offend in any circumstance. Ironically, it is this quiet dignity which allowed the Japanese Canadians to accept yet also persevere during this horrific period in their history.

Characters

Aya-obasan

See Ayako Nakane

Mr. Barker

When the family is allowed to leave the camp at Slocan but still refused access to Vancouver, they move to Granton and work in the sugar beet fields for Mr. Barker. He represents the typical Canadian of the interior. The whole family-Isamu, Obasan, Stephen, and Naomi-work the field of sugar beets. Their work, joined with Similar Japanese work across the Canadian heartland, wins the respect of the farmers because the harvest is a record crop. Mr. Barker appears toward the end of the novel to pay his respects to Obasan, but the scene is very awkward and his wife is extremely condescending.

Rough Lock Bill

Though his appearance is brief, the character of Rough Lock Bill is very important. He stands in direct contrast to the other male symbol of Canada, Mr. Gower. Rough Lock sees people as people and not as races. He also knows some of the stories of the land and it is not the first time that there is a link between the plight of the Japanese-Canadians and the Native Americans. Underlining the idea that there is good left in a hysterical Canada, it is Rough Lock who saves Naomi from drowning while Kenji runs away in fright.

Old Man Gower

The next-door neighbor of the house in Vancouver is Mr. Gower. Under the varying pretenses of scraped knees and treats, he lures Naomi close enough to be sexually caressed and undressed. He is also the one who is asked to watch the house when the family must leave. The irony is that all the adults know there will probably never be a return to the house. The experience With Mr. Gower haunts Naomi in Slocan. The forest for her hides his searching eyes and groping hands. Thus, through the horror of Mr. Gower, the wilderness of the Canadian interior is masculinized. This is a novelty on the part of Kogawa because in the history of literature the male protagonist masters a female universe Here, Naomi will finally master the wilds of Canada when she embraces the earth at the coulee.

Dr. Kato

When Grandma would travel back to Japan, Grandpa would look after Emily. This explains why Emily is less traditional. Grandma's first trip was taken while he was still in medical school. As a doctor, he has certain privileges that his family can take advantage of when internment begins. Thus Emily is able to go to Toronto rather than the camp at Slocan. Emily is unable to take the Nakanes.

Aunt Emily Kato

Governed by the old testament dictum, "Write the vision and make it plain," Aunt Emily Kato is the political firebrand. She bestows all her papers and zeal on Naomi in the hopes that she will pursue justice with her. At one point, Naomi describes Aunt Emily as "one of the world's white blood cells, rushing from trouble spot to trouble spot." Ironically, it is not Aunt Emily who makes the story known, it is the *daughter* of silent Obasan who tells the story. Nevertheless, Aunt Emily is the source of documentation. She offers the headlines, the executive orders, and the piles of letters. Aunt Emily is the character trying to make sense of the government's actions during World War II by gathering the facts. These facts, however, are little comfort to Naomi. Aunt Emily is the opposite female figure to Obasan. She will not be silent, she will demand that justice be done. Still, she kept silent about the death of Naomi's mother though Grandmother Kato couldn't.

Grandma Kato

The most traditional of the family, Grandma Kato never left Japan entirely. She returned quite often, and when Mother was old enough she went too. Consequently, Mother was like both Grandmas-yasashi. While on one of these trips, World War II broke out and they were stranded in Japan. Despite being traditional, she cannot bear the suffering of her daughter. Therefore, she writes to the family in Canada describing her horrific fate.

Grandpa Kato

See Dr. Kato

Kenji

Kenji is a playmate of Naomi's who tells her about the King bird who cuts off the tongues of those who lie. Kenji takes Naomi to the lake one summer day and entices her, with promises of caution, onto a raft. He swims her out accidentally beyond the drop-off. Out of fear at what he has done, he runs away, leaving Naomi adrift in the middle of the lake.

Mark

See Mr. Tadashi Nakane

Mother

See Mrs. Kato Nakane

Ayako Nakane

The title character of the book is based on Kogawa's aunt. She is the silent heart of the narrative-more an attitude than a person-and embodies the strength of silence. In the novel, Obasan is the daughter of a schoolteacher and was a well educated music teacher. She immigrated to Canada where she met Grandma Nakane. They became fast friends and she married her son, Uncle Isamu. She believes in the tradition of keeping quiet and accepting whatever life offers without protest. She holds to this when her babies die, her in-laws suffer at Nagasaki, the government confiscates the fishing boats, they are removed to the camps, and when her husband dies. According to Obasan, who says little beyond "0," one must accept the injustice. In her character is also a tribute to women and mothers the world over:

"Squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world. . Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite personal details."

For Naomi she becomes a mother figure when her actual mother is gone. Even so there always remains "an ominous sense of cold and absence." Obasan does her best and Naomi takes comfort from her softness and constancy.

Grandma Nakane

Grandma Nakane was yasashi, soft and silent. This means she was very traditional and, consequently, extremely powerful in nonverbal communication. She was the first to die in the camps, more out of a lack of understanding why she was there than the horrid conditions.

Grandpa Nakane

The first of Naomi's ancestors to come to Canada was a master boat builder. He quickly became famous and many fishermen came to his shop on Salt spring Island. He married a cousin's widowed wife. She brought him a son and bore him Naomi's father.

The two sons built a beautiful boat which was soon taken by the Royal Canadian Military Police in 1941. Grandpa Nakane did not survive the internment camp.

Uncle Isamu Nakane

Born in Japan in 1889, Isamu was a boat builder, like his father, on Lulu Island. After the government confiscated the fishing fleet, the Nakanes sought refuge near the Katos. Because of his brother's learning, the government sent him to work camp leaving Isamu to be stepfather to his children-Stephen and Naomi.

For eighteen years, Naomi and Uncle Isamu made a pilgrimage to a certain coulee near their home in Granton. Not until the end of the story does she realize that Uncle was trying to reveal the fate of her mother. This site then becomes Naomi's touchstone or memorial to her family and to the lost community of Vancouver.

Mrs. Kato Nakane

Mother is yasashi-soft and traditional-like her mother, Grandma Kato. She is the absent presence in the novel. The horrific details of her struggle to protect children in her care at Nagasaki are heart-wrenching but she doesn't want her children to know. This wish leads to almost thirty years of mystery for Naomi.

Megumi Naomi Nakane

The narrator of the novel is thirty-six-year-old school teacher Naomi Nakane. She is called from her teaching by the Principal to receive the news of her uncle's death. She returns to her aunt's house to be with her and to remember. Her story jumps about in time but follows her through her story of being sexually abused, losing her mother, being interned, and working the beet fields. When the whole family is assembled for the funeral, Naomi and her brother Stephen finally hear the story of their mother's death.

In the telling of the story, however, the adult narrator still allows for the collusion of her abuse by Old Man Gower and the departure of her mother. Being so young, she is easily able to accept Obasan as a substitute mother. In addition to her secret, Naomi is haunted by the shadow of the King Bird which bites off the lying tongue and brings more caution to Naomi's speech. Naomi felt that her secret with Mr. Gower prompted her mother to leave and stay away. She wants the past to stay in the past and is quite bothered by Aunt Emily's insistence that all be told, that facts be known.

Naomi the child was very quiet. So much so that her relatives often thought she was mute. However, she did ask questions especially about her mother. She never received answers and ceased asking. Similarly, in the chaos of being interned to the camp in Slocan, she lost her doll but only asked about it once because she knew it was lost. This linguistic anxiety clearly marks Naomi throughout the story and even marks the adult Naomi whom we first see troubled by her students' questions about her. In her

narration, on the other hand, her voice is steady. She has not raised her voice to tell about the injustice done her people as would her Aunt Emily, nor has she kept silent-which in a Euro-centric culture amounts to passive acceptance. Instead, her writing about a silence and through references to her own juvenile state and the many references to juvenile tales are an even voiced, steady documentation of a history of a wrong. The result is a declaration of cultural enrichment She is Canadian, oh Canada, ready or not.

Nomi Nakane

See Megumi Naomi Nakane

Stephen Nakane

The elder brother of Naomi is the musical prodigy Stephen. He has many advantages over Naomi, not least of which is his recourse to music as a voice. Thus he has two voices when Naomi has trouble enough with her own. Being older, Stephen also had more time to know his mother and he is better able to understand what is happening. Therefore, he is better able to handle her departure and he is also able to reject Obasan as a substitute Through music he has a ready bond with his father, and when they play, Naomi sits and listens.

Stephen is angry with his family and with Japanese-Canadians generally. While growing up, this is exhibited in a sour behavior and is symbolized by his broken leg. This is yet another reason for rejecting Obasan-by doing so he rejects the mother-culture. His attitude is first displayed when he is beat up before the internment. He is frustrated because he is Canadian, he plays European music, and he has nothing to do with World War II. Still, he has to be shipped off to the camp in Slocan where he hobbles about in his cast, playing records again and again on the gramophone. Finally, though he does come to the funeral, Stephen stays away as much as possible and only brings his fiancée by for a *few* minutes. They do not stay to eat.

Mr. Tadashi Nakane

Father was brought up as a boat builder but he is also a musician. For some reason he is singled out for the camps, whereas his brother Isamu eventually arrives at Slocan. His marriage to Mother is the first non-arranged marriage in the community. Father dies of tuberculosis in the internment hospital after living in a work camp.

Nakayama sensei

Anglican minister based on the author's father, who had been a Buddhist before he became a Christian preacher. Nakayama is the spiritual leader of the Japanese Canadian community and is always willing to help anyone in need. He leads the service

at Grandma Nakane's funeral, even though Buddhist rites are performed in accordance to Grandpa Nakane's wishes. At the end of the book, it is Nakayama Sensei who translates the letter Grandma Kato wrote to her husband after the war, revealing the tragic fate of Naomi's mother and the reason the children were never told.

Nesan

See Mrs. Kato Nakane

Nomura-Obasan

She stays with the family at Slocan for a time. She is an old friend of the family's from Vancouver and as such is referred to as Obasan, aunt. She is frail and has contracted TB. This causes a scene at the baths and is the reason why Naomi is not allowed to play with Reiko.

Obasan

See Ayako Nakane

Reiko

Reiko is another playmate in Slocan. But when her mother finds out that someone at Naomi's house is ill, they can be friends no more. Reiko shows how intolerance is spread because she has learned that sickness is a shame. Whereas, Naomi is taught that it is a misfortune.

Themes

Prejudice and Tolerance

The *root* of the internment lies in prejudice. Early in the novel when Naomi is first browsing through Aunt Emily's parcel, there is a nice encapsulation of the problem. Naomi has noted that every time the words "Japanese race" appeared in the new articles or in pamphlets, Aunt Emily has crossed them out and Written "Canadian citizens." Therein lies the problem. Naomi's family were viewed as visitors and then, with the outbreak of war, as the enemy. There is no good reason for this. Asian immigrants to North America were as recent as the Irish and many of the European immigrants who came after World War I. Yet neither the Italians nor the Germans were interned. The scapegoating of the Japanese appears directly in the confiscation of the fishing boats and then when Stephen gets beat up at school. It is also visible after the war. The Japanese Canadians are still not allowed to return to the coast and many signs along the highway say, "Japs Keep Out." Still, little sense can be made out of all that happened and Naomi thinks of Grandma Nakane in her stall in prison "too old then to understand political expediency, race riots, the yellow peril. She was told that a war was on."

These forms of intolerance are not the only ones seen by Naomi. There is her brother's developing dislike of his family and his heritage. But the example of Stephen is long in developing. There is one episode, however, that is clear. Near the end of their time in Slocan, Naomi's friend is not allowed to speak with her. Their meeting, therefore, is a very awkward moment in the baths. Once outside, Naomi hears from her friends, "we can't play with you ... you're sick. You've all got TB. You and the Nomuras and your dad." This is news to Naomi but Uncle Isamu later explains to her, "For some people it is a shameful matter to be ill. But it is a matter of misfortune, not shame." The attitude of some within the exiled community toward the less fortunate, being expressed by Reiko, lends a great deal of realism to the novel because it shows that the interned group is not faultless. Finally, it hints at how intolerance is transmitted. Reiko admits she knows only what "my mom told me." Just as Reiko is learning how to judge, Naomi learns to accept those who are ill like old Nomura-obasan, who lived with them for awhile on a cot in the kitchen.

Identity

The second chapter opens with Naomi receiving the third degree from her students about her love life. It is an uncomfortable but usual discussion to her as a teacher. Still, she feels the interrogation acutely because her identity is unresolved Her tumultuous life has left her "tense" with "a crone-prone syndrome" and many mysteries, silences, and repressed traumas. Just as the young Naomi took a while to realize her father was dead, the mature Naomi has not understood how incredible was the trauma of her sexual abuse, the loss of her mother, and the disruption of community caused by war.

She finally resolves these issues when she knows the whole truth and, consequently, faces her history. In the end, she is resolved when she runs out into the night wearing Aunt Emily's jacket to go to the coulee. There, inspired by the silence of Obasan and what Uncle tried to tell her, she finally feels at ease with the land and at ease with herself. The nightmares will now cease and she will bury her family in Canada, her home.

Justice vs. Injustice

Injustice in the novel is always mirrored by an accompanying act of violation. The official policy of scapegoating the Japanese violates the family in apparent and secret ways. The fishing boats are taken, their civil rights are taken, and Mother is trapped in Japan as war breaks out. But this is merely the background to the violation of innocence represented by the awful scene of the mother hen killing the chicks and Old Man Gower. The sexual abuse of Naomi initiates her into the sexual world at the same time as the world is going through tremendous upheaval.

Sexual violence is the symbolic gesture of injustice as well as being a very personal injustice-rape is the metaphoric and real violation of people in this book and all are silent as a result (all communications with the camps were censored or silenced). It is not only Mr. Gower. Later in Slocan, a boy named Percy is indiscrete with her. It is Mr. Gower, however, who haunts her and remains the one thing she cannot tell her mother. His assault on her, she fathoms, can be the only explanation for Mother leaving and not returning. Because of Mr Gower, she feels eyes watching her in the woods and has nightmares of a saw separating her legs from each other and from her mother. Gayle Fujita wrote in *Melus,* "The resulting cleavage represents not only a natural separation of growing up, but unnatural guilt and fear due to the nature of initiation and its being complicated because it is 'around this time that mother disappears.'" Sexuality, Mother, and her identity are inextricably linked.

Memory and Reminiscence

"The past is the future," says Aunt Emily, and indeed it is the whole purpose of the book. One symbol of Naomi's revelation of the past is the sweep of her flashlight across the multitude of spider webs in Obasan's attic. Naomi has followed her aunt up to the attic in the middle of the silent night to find Aunt Emily's parcel that Naomi has been putting off reading for years. Instead, they find only dust and spiders in the attic. Thus the attic has served as the repository of memory and what it holds has been forgotten-left for the spiders. There is au additional reference to spiders in the "weaving" of stories. This theme recalls Penelope, the wife of Ulysses who wove and unwove a tapestry in an attempt to put off her suitors. Naomi's story itself is constructed like a web. Her mother and father are her needles but they leave and it is a long time before Naomi has the pieces from her aunts to finish herself. Also, her story Jumps forward and backward, from center to edge, but, finally, as a web it catches the identity created by the story-Naomi.

There is another symbol of this telling in the Kingbird. He represents the narrator's fear at exaggerating or lying about the tale. This is the reason why the narrator gives way to explanation through fairy tales-Goldilocks, Heidi, and Momotaro. The latter is au oral story from Japan told to her at bedtime. It is the story of a young hero, similar to Hercules, who devotes ills life to helping people in their battles against greater powers. In many ways, Kogawa's Naomi has a certain affinity with this hero. By her confessed remembrance, she gives strength to the anti-nuclear movement and, specifically, to the redress movement in Canada. As with Naomi, once all the pieces are present and the full story can be told, only then, Obasan would say, "the time of forgetting is now come."

BOOKRAGS

Style

Autobiography

The novel is a first person account of a woman who is breaking silence about several aspects of her life and the history she lived through. As the narrator, the adult Naomi is facing the death of her uncle Isamu, and Obasan feels it is time that Naomi read Emily's parcel full of factual auger In other words, it is time to deal with the past. But Naomi's response is peculiar. She describes personal memories and childhood experiences that seem to have no place in the story's political commitment. As a result, reading time jumps from the present death of her uncle to points in the past, beginning with herself as a quiet little girl losing her mother. Due to the point of view being Naomi's, who rarely received answers to her questions when she asked them, the recollection is hazy and the characters often remain presences and never become personalities. The result is au almost pure recollection of girlhood whose testimony is more powerful than any of the facts collected by Emily.

Imagery

The images in the novel are a blend of Christian and Buddhist traditions, coming in the forms of allegorical moments and strict dream visions. However, the central symbol of the work is Naomi's mother. She is not a character in the story so much as a remembered tale. Naomi has few stories of her mother and she constantly asks others for their recollections of her mother. The effect is to make her more a governing spirit than a real person. Words that bang mother to the story are almost prayerful For example, "Mother, I am listening. Assist me to hear you. You are tide rushing moonward.'"

All such surrounding language matches the superhuman account of Nagasaki where Mother guarded the children in her care despite the radiation bums. This apocalyptic event, both linguistically and structurally, is the high point of the novel. Amazingly, It is very soft-spoken and written in simple sentences, "it was my mother.'" As the symbol of motherhood, mother-culture, and the pre-war bliss, she survived the ultimate weapon with horrible disfigurement. Her survival motivates Naomi to piece herself together and finally offer her story as therapy for the whole community.

Diction

The words forming the novel are carefully chosen and become active players in the plot structure in unusual ways. The reason for this is that the novel is breaking the silence that the victims were intended to keep. Naomi recalls, "We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication." In keeping silent, however, the victims are not whole. "If you cut any of [your history] off, you're an amputee. Don't deny the past." Those are words from Aunt Emily, whose

succinct and inflammatory writing style stands in stark contrast to the poetics of the narrative as a whole. Aunt Emily means well, means to tell the truth. But like the two ideograms of love, there are different ways of telling the tale.

Due to the delicacy of the situation-so many want the story to stay silent and be forgotten while others want to scream it out-the words are carefully chosen and the writing makes liberal use of allegory. The stone bread made by Uncle is like the manna that nourished the Israelites. Uncle is also compared to Sitting Bull and thus the removal of the Japanese is compared to the earlier act of putting the indigenous people on reservations. Similarly, Emily's parcel is like the stone bread as it provides nourishment for the mind. Oftentimes, biblical writing is used. "When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food," recalls the Christian gospel. Allegorical language also serves to blend Buddhist imagery into the tale by introducing the "white stone" and the idea of nature' s dancing. The effect of Kogawa's language is to make the barrier between dream or story and reality, present and past, and nature and individual almost nonexistent.

Dream Vision

There are many dreams in the work but all stem from the two forces driving the novel-sexual abuse and the loss of mother because of the war. The dreams grow out of Naomi's anxiety over sex due to early abuse and whether that initiation into sexuality caused her mother to leave. But her dreams also offer answers by showing the ways in which the family members are linked. Her uncle appears to be attempting to help her and thus the dream vision is not easily separated from the reality of the story. In one dream, Uncle is making a ceremonial bow as his part of the flower dance. It is Naomi's struggle, then, to realize what the ceremony is that she must complete in order to put the ghosts of the past to rest. She finally does this in the novel's closing epiphany.

Historical Context

Canada

Canada is a large and sparsely populated country and a member of the British Commonwealth and NAFTA. It is generally seen throughout the world as a relatively neutral, and therefore non-threatening, nation. However, the tales of Amerindian and Inuit removals and the internment of Canadians with Japanese ancestry in World War II remain whispered tales. Also, Canada's recent skirmishes with European countries, especially Spain, over fishing area hints at larger environmental faults.

Canada's constitution is surprisingly new and unsettled. After steadily gaining nominal independence, discussion of rescinding the British North America Act began in 1927 as the first step toward making Canada independent. Limbo existed until 1981, when the Constitution Act was passed under the Liberal Prime Minister Plerre Trudeau. The Act was in turn accepted by Queen Elizabeth II in the following spring. This effectively replaced the British North American Act as the working document of the Canadian government. Unfortunately, not all of the provinces were ready to accept the Act. Quebec wanted independence and would not sign. To keep Quebec in the Union it was offered the special status of "distinct society" by the Meech Lake Accord of 1987. The Inuit and Amerindians of Canada were also granted "distinct society" status. Quebec's privilege angered the provinces of New Brunswick and Manitoba, who refused to ratify the Act. Another compromise came in the Charlottetown Accord of 1992, but that was rejected by referendum.

World War II

Canada under the premiership of William Lyon Mackenzie King entered World War II earlier than the United States. It contributed more than one million men to the Allies' war effort and lost 32,000 men. The anti-Asian sentiment in Canada had been prevalent in the late thirties and was officially expressed when the Canadian government confiscated the fishing fleet of its Canadians of Japanese ancestry. This racist policy increased to the point of hysteria with the news of Pearl Harbor's demise on December 7, 1941. In the United States, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, calling for the immediate evacuation and internment of 110,000 West Coast Japanese despite the fact that fully two-thirds of them were American citizens. In Canada, where evacuation had been underway, the process Was speeded up. Thus, 21,000 Canadians of Japanese ancestry were forced into work camps and interment camps far from the West Coast. Of those removed, 17,000 were Canadian born and, therefore, the removal was a gross violation of human rights and civil liberties. Unlike internment in America, Canada still restricted Japanese-Canadian movements for many years after the war. Furthermore, the United States returned confiscated property-Canada never did-and, therefore, the Japanese community in the United States recovered much faster.

The illegality of the removal was not unnoticed even by members of King's own government. Asian immigrants, however, had long been seen by both the United States and Canada as "sojourners," or as immigrants who would eventually return home. In addition, before the early part of this century, Asians were subject to various mandates that effectively barred them from citizenship and limited their property owning capacity. Therefore, the allowing of Asian-immigrants the same status as immigrants from anywhere else in the world was a recent development. This does not excuse the internment but it offers some explanation to the perception of Asians as foreigners and, consequently, as a potential threat to security during World War II. In other words, the resentment against "foreigners" taking away the jobs of citizens contributed to the enthusiasm for scapegoating certain people. The idea of ruining the prosperous Japanese-Canadian community by taking their land, ships, and fishing areas so soon after the depression years helped to drive the removal hysteria.

National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC)

The NAJC achieved the Redress Agreement in 1988 with the Government of Canada on behalf of all Canadians of Japanese ancestry. This agreement was a settlement of the conditions of restitution to those Japanese Canadians illegally interned and dispossessed of their property during World War II. As a result of the Agreement, the Government of Canada formally apologized for the violation of human rights committed by the act of internment and dispossession. In addition, the government paid out symbolic amounts to those Japanese Canadians affected; it established a $12 million community fund to be administered by the Japanese Canadian Redress Foundation. Lastly, the government established the Canadian Race Relations Foundation for the purpose of researching and fighting racism.

Canada's Liabilities

In addition to the demand for redress from those Canadians affected by the government's actions during World War II, Canada has had to deal with other cultural stresses. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the indigenous peoples of Canada won many court battles and were given money and land from the government. Their success was helped by the concurrent move in America by tribes to have treaties honored. But for a few exceptions, this remained a legal struggle with a happy outcome. Another problem that persists is oil revenue. Alberta and Newfoundland have various disagreements with the government over regulation, pricing, and revenue sharing. In Newfoundland, this prevented the exploitation of the vast Hibernia oil reserves offshore until the 1980s.

A more violent stress in Canada has been Quebec and French-speaking Canadians generally. The problem here is a larger one because it involves a problem in the working document of government and the status of Quebec. During the 1970s, the Quebec Liberation Front performed various terrorist acts which led to the invocation of the War Measures Act in peace time and the banning of the group. The declaration of French as

the official language of Quebec helped calm some anxiety. In 1976, the separatist Parti Quebecois, under the leadership of Premier Rene Levesque, was elected to power in Quebec and immediately proposed independence. The ballot measure was defeated in a referendum with an 82% turnout.

Critical Overview

Critics and reviewers have found a lot to say about Kogawa' s first novel because of its wondrous poetic prose and its successful attempt to express the Canadian hybrid as art. The most popular theme to pick up on in the critical literature is family and how Kogawa writes the family drama as non-Oedipal but a struggle of the mother-culture to survive in patriarchy. It is this struggle which either leaves the daughter devastated or barely intact. The other obvious focus for critics has been the cultural blending of the Japanese and the Canadian that Kogawa subtly accomplishes. Other interpretations have focused on the landscape as a force in the novel which eventually overcomes the government's action.

Following the publication of the novel and the awards, the first reviews were bland. They were almost bothered by the silences of the novel. An early review in the *Canadian Forum* by Suanne Kelman positively assessed the novel for its ability to transcribe a very political history into a well-crafted piece of literature. Edward White repeated that praise in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* adding, "[the] novel must be heard ... [for] exposing the viciousness of the racist horror, embodying the beauty that somehow survives." Critics dealing with the work in the mid-eighties, however, had begun to delve into the complexities for which the novel was deservedly rewarded. The first of this wave was Erika Gottlieb's article in *Canadian Literature.* Since then there have developed five areas of critical focus: puzzle and cross-reference; the place of literature in politics and history; the role of landscape in identity; the difficulties of cultural clash in terms of language both body and tongue; and the psychological drama of mother-daughter relations.

With Gottlieb the novel becomes more than a historical novel making poetry of human injustice. Gottlieb writes, "The novel sets up these multidimensional questions as puzzles arranged in a concentric pattern-container hidden within container within container-creating a sense of mystery and tension." These containers, for Gottlieb, are the three riddles of hidden manna, hidden voice, and hidden reason. They reflect the three dimensions of Naomi, the cosmos, and Canada. It is Gottlieb who suggests that the spider webs in the attic mimic the time-jump in the narrative. More significantly, Gottlieb has taken the time to translate the intricacies of Japanese culture endemic in the novel. She suggests that the space of the novel is akin to the space in Buddhism for mourning. Thus the story is begun by news of Uncle's death and ends on the eve of his funeral. There is also the echo of the tea ceremony and the many icons that invoke the blend of Christianity and Buddhism in the work. Following her leads, many critics have attempted to further Gottlieb's solution to the Obasan puzzle or correct her translation. Teruyo Ueki, for example, in her article for *Melus,* reads the novel in terms of Aunt Emily's parcel. She first agrees with Gottlieb's interpretation, but then shows how "the riddles are arranged as 'the folder structure.'" She does this down to the very ribbons tying the parcel together. The grandest container is, of course, the landscape. Karin Quimby focuses on this aspect of the novel and draws the connection between Naomi's growth and the three locales of the story (Vancouver, Slocan, and Granton). These readings reveal that the dreams of flower and roots reconcile themselves in the last

scene. There, Naomi is physically rooting in the Canadian prairie with her hands in the grass.

Readings of the novel focusing on culture clash, begin with Gary Willis's article in *Studies in Canadian Literature.* His thesis depends on Kogawa's comparison of Western versus Japanese forms of carpentry. The latter pulls "with control rather than push with force." King-Kok Cheung, in the collection of essays *Listening to Silences,* explains the power of silence and the way it functions in the novel. The key is to realize that silence does not mean passivity. Instead, the novel's silences articulate in literary form "the use of nonverbal expression." To read the novel's silences otherwise, says Cheung, is to fall prey to Orientalism or the stereotype of the submissive Asian. "The thematics and poetics of silence are tightly interwoven. ... The narrator negotiates between voicelessness and vociferousness, embodied respectively by her two aunts." Calling the novel a *polyglossia* (because of the several layers of meaning, for example, contained in the ideogram for love), Cheung notices that Kogawa "deploys fables and dreams to spin a web of associations, of verbal and emotional echoes." Cheung ends by referring to the example of carpentry suggesting that Kogawa has carved a style with "the pull of silences." Gayle Fujita picks up on Cheung's insights and reads Kogawa in terms of the story of Momotaro.

Returning to the idea that the novel is historical, Marilyn Rose wrote for *Mosaic* that in a postmodern world literature is still able to convey human experience. She compares the novel to the documentary writing being produced in the late seventies about the internment. Rose argues that by creating Naomi as a "humble and tentative narrator" Kogawa's "argument against this historically specific injustice makes compelling art." Mason Harris has a similar view of the novel in his essay for *Canadian Literature.* His purpose is to pay closer attention not just to how the novel functions on a cultural level as novel or documentary but the way in which the novel itself struggles with that function. For him the novel not only reconstructs "a suppressed chapter of Canadian history" but the transformation of the immigrant family through several generations to adjust to the new culture and the pains that arise between the generations. Both Robin Potter and Eleanor Ty offer a more exacting psychological reading of the novel with the assistance of Feminist theorists Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Ty also picks up on a neglected aspect of Kogawa's Naomi when she compares *Obasan* to Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* in the *International Fiction Review.* She writes that the mother "evokes an otherness fraught with sexual and racial overtones for Naomi." This condition, she continues, must be demythologized if Naomi is to create new forms of -language and expression as a Canadian.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Anthony Dykema-VanderArk is a doctoral candidate in English at Michigan State University. In the following essay, he analyzes the importance of ambiguity, irony, and paradox in Obasan.

Since its publication in 1981, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* has assumed an important place in Canadian literature and in the broadly-defined, Asian American literary canon. Reviewers immediately heralded the novel for its poetic force and its moving portrayal of an often-ignored aspect of Canadian and American history. Since then, critics have expanded upon this initial commentary to examine more closely the themes and images in Kogawa's work. Critical attention has focused on the difficulties and ambiguities of what is, in more ways than one, a challenging novel. The complexity of *Obasan's* plot, the intensity of its imagery, and the quiet bitterness of its protest challenge readers to wrestle with language and meaning in much the same way that Naomi must struggle to understand her past and that of the larger Japanese-Canadian community. In this sense, the attention that *Obasan* has received from readers and Critics parallels the challenges of the text: Kogawa's novel, one might say, demands to be reckoned with, intellectuality as well as emotionally.

Much about Kogawa's novel makes it difficult not only to read but also to classify or categorize. First, *Obasan* blurs the line between nonfiction and fiction. Kogawa draws from actual letters and newspaper accounts, autobiographical details, and historical facts throughout the novel, but she artistically incorporates this material into a clearly fictional work In addition, Kogawa's narrative operates on multiple levels, from the individual and familial to the communal, national, political, and spiritual. Stylistically, the novel moves easily between the language of documentary reportage and a richly metaphorical language, and between straightforward narrative and stream-of-consciousness exposition. This astonishing variety in Kogawa's novel can, at times, become bewildering and unsettling to the reader. But as many readers and critics have noted, Kogawa's style and method in *Obasan* also constitute the novel's unique strength. Kogawa writes in such a way that ambiguity, uncertainty, irony, and paradox do not weaken her story but instead-paradoxically-become the keys to understanding it.

The reader's experience of ambiguity in *Obasan* begins with the poetically-charged proem, preceding chapter one, which opens with these words:

There is a silence that cannot speak.
There is a silence that will not speak.

Does Kogawa intend these lines to introduce "silence" as a character of sorts? Does the second line clarify the first, or does it instead differentiate one silence from another, an involuntary muteness from a willed refusal to speak? These and other questions remain unanswered in the proem. Only after beginning the novel-proper does the reader recognize Naomi as the author of these words; and only after completing the novel can the reader begin to grasp the significance of the questions introduced in the proem,

particularly the charged question of silence. *Obasan* dwells on many silences: the silence of history concerning the suffering of Japanese-Canadians during and after World War II; the silence of those who have died and "cannot speak" any longer; the "large and powerful" silence of Obasan; Aunt Emily's outspoken opposition to silence as a "word warrior" for the Japanese Canadian cause; the silence of Obasan, Uncle, and Emily who, in spite of Naomi's questions, "will not speak" of the fate of her mother; and, finally, Naomi's "Silent Mother" herself, who initially chooses not to speak of her horrific injuries at Nagasaki in an effort to protect her children from the truth, then is lost in the permanent silence of death. Naomi's persistent attempts to penetrate these various silences form the story at the heart of *Obasan.*

However, Kogawa also recognizes the paradoxical power of silence. Naomi wonders, for example, if Obasan's grief might represent a "language" with "idioms" and "nuances" all its own. While Obasan's silent suffering often brings her to isolation and a trance-like paralysis, Naomi also sees in her a representative figure of strength and endurance, "the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels" As King-Kok Chenng argues in her reading of *Obasan,* "one must avoid gliding over the tonalities of silence in the novel" in order to recognize the "quiet strength" of first-generation Japanese-Canadians like Uncle and Obasan.

Conversely, Kogawa illustrates that language is only a *potential* antidote to a dangerous silence: like silence, language can imprison just as it can liberate. Emily's bundle of written documents clearly exerts a powerful, positive influence on Naomi by urging her to "remember everything" and to come to terms with the pain of her childhood and adolescence Yet Naomi also wonders if "all of Aunt Emily's words, all her papers" finally amount to little more than "scratchings in the barnyard." Emily may be a "word warrior," but her "paper battles" cannot bring Naomi's parents back to life or return the family to their idyllic Vancouver home, cannot address the deepest truth of Naomi's loss.

Similarly, when Emily writes "Canadian citizen" over "Japanese race" in a pamphlet, the gesture appears utterly futile next to the Canadian government's powerful naming. Those in power can, for example, call Japan the rightful "homeland" of Japanese-Canadians or mask official acts of racist persecution with deceptively-bland terms such as "evacuation," "relocation," and "assistance." Kogawa understands that the efficacy of language depends in part on the power to enforce words, to enforce a version of reality. At the same time, she powerfully depicts Naomi's struggle to find words of her own to describe her childhood experience. Naomi needs to find language to mark out a middle ground between Emily's solution, "spreading words like buckshot," and Obasan's retreat into silence.

Kogawa also uses the motif of language and silence to illustrate the paradoxical or ironic nature of Naomi's experience as a child. For instance, Naomi's abuse at the hands of Old Man Gower produces a particularly painful double-bind of silence. On the one hand, with Mr. Gower, Naomi feels that remaining silent is the only way to be "whole and safe": "If I am still, I will be safe If I speak, I will split open and spill out." On the other hand, her secret knowledge and shame threaten the wholeness and safety that Naomi feels with her mother: "If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a

tremor through our bodies and I will be tom from her. But the secret has already separated us." But paradox and irony also characterize the experience of the Japanese-Canadian community as a whole during and after World War II. Stephen summarizes the situation of every Japanese-Canadian citizen when he tells Naomi, "It is a riddle we are both the enemy and not the enemy." In a similar fashion, Aunt Emily points to fundamental irony in the situation of the Japanese immigrant generation: "In one breath we are damned for being 'inassimilable' and the next there's fear that we'll assimilate." Finally, as Sauling Cynthia Wong notes, movement and mobility also take on ironic resonance in *Obasan,* since a people determined to settle down are forced to move repeatedly, leaving homes and possessions behind, while those who resist relocation are imprisoned. In all of these painful, paradoxical situations, neither silence nor speech offer any effective means of resolution to Naomi or her community

But Kogawa incorporates paradox in *Obasan* in more positive, life-affirming ways as well. When Aunt Emily says to Naomi, "it must have been hell in the ghost towns," she is only half correct: Naomi's memories of life in Slocan include not only disturbing images of cruelty and death but also compelling scenes of friendship and community. Just as memories of Mr. Gower disrupt Naomi's recollections of an idyllic childhood before the evacuation, so too the restoration of a sense of community in Slocan undermines Emily's single-minded view of its absolute destruction. Of course, Naomi's positive memories of Slocan do not lessen the Crime of relocation and internment, do not excuse what the Canadian and American governments did to Japanese residents and citizens. But Kogawa's portrayal of Naomi's experience presents a more complicated vision of human suffering than any allowed by Emily's outspoken political protest.

In a review entitled "Impossible to Forgive," Suanne Kelman contends that *Obasan* illuminates "the most horrible of all human paradoxes," that "injustice provokes more guilt in its victims than in its perpetrators." However, a desire to believe that forgiveness is *not* impossible also runs throughout Kogawa's novel, spoken most clearly by Nakayama-sensei: "It is a high calling my friends-the calling to forgive." Naomi resists Nakayama-sensei's message, leaving the room when he speaks of Love, drowning out his voice when he speaks of forgiveness. But the resonance of his message is not lost, and his voice-though he speaks of paradoxical truths-is not, as some critics have argued, finally ironic. Instead, Kogawa instills in her novel faint echoes of hope, small but powerful signs of forgiveness, that persist even in the midst of a despair that will not ever be wholly overcome.

By the end of *Obasan,* Naomi does not miraculously resolve her painful struggle with the past or achieve any easy catharsis, but she does find a more positive, less paralyzing way of seeing. The double-bind of silence that Naomi suffered as a child because of Old Man Gower's abusive touch, a silence that threatened to separate her forever from her mother, now opens her eyes to her mother's own suffering and impenetrable silence. Though Naomi rejects her mother's decision to protect her children by "lies" and "camouflage," she recognizes the love that motivated it and the bond that joins mother and daughter: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction." Having learned the truth of her

mother's suffering and death, Naomi can perceive her mother's immutable presence in her life even as she acknowledges her literal absence. She can envision a certain gentleness in Griefs eyes, a "brooding light" amidst the darkness of death, and an "underground stream" flowing around the "world of stone" that holds her lost loved ones.

At the end of *Obasan,* Naomi returns to the coulee to mourn her own deep loss, to grieve for her Uncle, and to carry on his ritual of remembering those lost forever to that "world of stone." But she goes with new insight into his grief and her own, having come to terms with the painful experiences and the troubling silences that have haunted her life. Fittingly, Kogawa captures Naomi's newfound peace in a paradoxical yet hopeful image of stone and water in harmony, in the reflection of the moon on the river: Though her own shoes are "mud-clogged" and heavy, Naomi can envision "water and stone dancing" in a "quiet ballet, soundless as breath."

Source: Anthony Dykema-VanderArk, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

King-Kok Cheung is an author, educator, and associate director of the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California at Los Angeles. She not only points out the difference between a Eurocentric and Oriental understanding of "silence," but makes three further distinctions-protective, stoic, and attentive silences-and Kogawa's attitude toward them in Obasan.

Since the Civil Rights movement in the late 1960s, women and members of racial minorities have increasingly sworn off the silence imposed upon them by the dominant culture. Yet silence should also be given its due. Many Asian Americans, in their attempts to dispel the stereotype of the quiet and submissive Oriental, have either repressed or denied an important component of their heritage-the use of nonverbal expression. With many young Asian Americans turning against this aspect of their culture and non-Asians even less able to understand the allegedly "inscrutable" minority, it is not surprising that Joy Kogawa's *Obasan,* an autobiographical novel, has been subject to tendentious reviews. To Edith Milton [writing in the *New York Times Book Review,* September 5, 1982] the book is "a study in painful silence, in unquestioning but troubled obedience to the inevitable"; to David Low [writing in *Bridge,* 8:3, 1983] it is "clearly a novel about the importance of communication and the danger of keeping silent"; to Joyce Wayne [in *RIKKA,* 8:2, 1981] it is "a tale of the submissive silence of the oppressed." The resounding condemnation of silence reflects the bias of "translation" or of language itself which, as Paula Gunn Allen tells us [in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions,* 1986], "embodies the unspoken assumptions and Orientations of the culture it belongs to." In English, *silence* is often the opposite of *speech, language,* or *expression.* The Chinese and Japanese character for *silence,* on the other hand, is antonymous to *noise, motion,* and *commotion.* In the United States silence is generally looked upon as passive; in China and Japan it traditionally signals pensiveness, alertness, and sensitivity.

These differences are too often eclipsed by a Eurocentric perspective to which even revisionist critics may succumb. As Chandra Mohanty has argued [in *Boundary,* 1984], much of Western feminist representation of oppressed "third world" women is pitted against the implicit self representation of Western women as educated, liberated and, I might add, verbally assertive: "These distinctions are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent." A similar norm frequently governs the assessment of racial minorities in North America. Marilyn Russell Rose, a sophisticated critic keenly aware of the danger of Orientalist discourse, nevertheless places inordinate blame on the victims in *Obasan:* "'Orientalism' has been so internalized by this Oriental minority, that their silence is an inadvertent bow to the occidental hegemony which legitimizes their abuse" [*Dalhousie Review,* 1987]. Undeniably, nikkei have been subject to political exploitation, but to view their reticence as no more than the internalization of Occidental stereotypes is to tune out the "other" perceptions of silence in the novel. Countering Orientalism means challenging Western reduction or homogenization of Asian traits, but not necessarily denying or denouncing the traits themselves.

BOOKRAGS

Situated on the crossroads of cultures, Kogawa in *Obasan* shows a mixed attitude toward both language and silence and reevaluates both in ways that undermine logo-centrism. Certainly, language can liberate and heal, but it can also distort and hurt; and while silence may smother and obliterate, it can also minister, soothe, and communicate. The verbal restraint that informs Kogawa's theme and style manifests not only the particular anguish of voicelessness but also what Gayle Fujita describes [in *MELUS,* 12:3, 1985] as the narrator's specific nikkei legacy-"a nonverbal mode of apprehension summarized by the 'term attendance.' " Where Fujita subsumes several forms of reticence under the rubric "attendance," however, I find it necessary to distinguish among protective, stoic, and attentive silences, which Kogawa regards with varying attitudes. Kogawa also deplores negative manifestations of silence, such as political oppression through censorship and enforced invisibility, and the victims' repression.

The thematics and poetics of silence are tightly interwoven. On the thematic level, the narrator negotiates between voicelessness and vociferousness, embodied respectively by her two aunts The style of the novel likewise evinces a double heritage. The biblical injunction to "write the vision and make it plain"-advocated by one of the aunts-is soft-pedaled by the narrator's preference for indirection, a preference which sociologist Stanford Lyman associates with the nisei generally. Even as the narrator confronts the outrages committed during World War II, she resorts to elliptical devices, such as juvenile perspective, fragmented memories and reveries, devices which at once accentuate fictionality and proffer a "truth" that runs deeper than the official Written records of the war years spliced into the novel. The gaps in the narrative demand from the reader a vigilance and receptivity that correspond to the narrator's attentiveness....

The novel is presented from the point of view of Naomi Nakane, a 36-year-old schoolteacher. It begins in 1972 when Naomi's Uncle Isamu is still alive in Granton, Alberta. A month later, Isamu dies and Naomi goes to comfort his widow Aunt Aya-the title character. *Obasan* is *Aunt* in Japanese, but it can also mean *woman* in general. The title thus implicitly "acknowledges the connectedness of all women's lives-Naomi, her mother, her two aunts" [according to Fujita, *MELUS,* 1985]. At Obasan's house Naomi finds a parcel from her Aunt Emily that contains wartime documents, letters, and Emily's own journal written between December 1941 and May 1942. (Many of Emily's letters of protest to the Canadian government are based on the real letters of Muriel Kitagawa, a Japanese-Canadian activist.) As Naomi sifts through the contents of this package, she reluctantly sinks into her own past. She recalls the uprooting and dissolution of her family during and after the war: her father died of tuberculosis; two of her grandparents died of physical and mental stress. Naomi and her older brother Stephen were brought up by Uncle Isamu and Obasan. Hovering over the tale is the riddle of what has happened to Naomi's mother, who accompanied Grandma Kato (Naomi's maternal grandmother) to Japan on a visit shortly before the war, when Naomi was five. Only at the end of the book do Naomi and Stephen (and the reader) discover that their mother had been totally disfigured during the nuclear blast in Nagasaki and died a few years later Before her death she requested Obasan and Uncle to spare her children the truth. The adults succeed all too well in keeping the secret; Naomi does not find out about her mother's fate for over thirty years.

The novel depicts Naomi's plight of not knowing and not being able to tell. Naomi has been speechless and withdrawn throughout childhood and adolescence-her quiet disposition tied to her mother's unexplained absence. As a girl she questions but receives no answer; as an adult she prefers to leave the question unspoken because she dreads knowing As Magnusson has observed [in *Canadian Literature/Litterature Canadienne* 116, Spring, 1988], "Naomi's individual drama is closely caught up in her linguistic anxiety, which comes to serve as a synecdoche for her estrangement-from others, from her cultural origins, from the absent mother who preoccupies her thoughts, from her past."

In her quest for identity and for peace, Naomi is influenced by her two aunts' contrary responses to their harrowing experiences during the war. Obasan, the reticent aunt who raises Naomi, counsels her to forget and to forgive. Aunt Emily, the political activist, presses her to divulge the indignities endured by Japanese Canadians-to "write the vision and make it plain." Emily brings to mind the Old Testament prophets who cry for justice; Obasan, the New Testament preaching of humility, forgiveness, and charity But both sets of behavior also have roots in Japanese culture. As Michiko Lambertson points out, "There are two poles in the Japanese way of thinking. One is a fatalistic attitude of acceptance, endurance, and stoicism and the other is a sense of justice, honour, and fair play" *[Canadian Woman Studies* 4:2,1982]. Obasan's attitude is as much Buddhist as Christian; she moves with equal ease in Christian and Buddhist burial ceremonies, always ready with her serving hands. Emily's activism, though ascribed to her Canadian schooling, is also promoted in the Japanese tale, recounted in the novel, of Momotaro-the boy who defends his people valiantly against cruel bandits (see Fujita). Naomi remarks:

How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior. She's a crusader, a little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes.

Naomi feels invaded by Emily's words and frustrated by Obasan's wordlessness. She undercuts Emily's polemics with irony and strains to hear Obasan's inner speech...

If skepticism about language and interrogation of majority consensus aligns Kogawa with many a woman writer and postmodernist thinker, her ability to project a spectrum of silence is, as Fujita suggests, traceable to her bicultural heritage. To monitor this peculiar sensibility, one must avoid gliding over the tonalities of silence in the novel, or seeing them all negatively as destructive. The protagonist, to be sure, struggles against oppressive and inhibitive silence. She also feels divided about the protective and the stoic silence of the issei which has sheltered her as a child but paralyzes her as an adult. She continues nevertheless to cherish the communicative and attentive silence she has learned from several female forerunners.

Oppressive silence in the novel takes both individual and collective forms, inflicted on women and men alike. As a child Naomi was sexually abused by a neighbor-Old Man Gower-who forbade her to tell of the violation: "Don't tell your mother." Later, it is the

Canadian government that harasses the Japanese Canadians and suppresses the victims. Emily notes: "All cards and letters are censored. Not a word from the camps makes the papers. Everything is hushed up." Naomi tells: "We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication."

Not an uncommon reaction to suppression is repression on the part of the victims. Instead of voicing anger at the subjugators, they seal their lips in shame. Child Naomi, whose relationship with her mother has been one of mutual trust, begins to nurse a secret that separates them after her molestation. Racial abuse similarly gags the victim. When Stephen is beaten up by white boys, he refuses to tell Naomi what has caused his injury. Naomi intuits, "Is he ashamed, as I was in Old Man Gower's bathroom?" Rape, Erika Gottlieb points out, is used here as "metaphor for any kind of violation" *[Canadian Literature* 109, Summer, 1986]. Like Stephen, many Japanese Canadians also refuse to speak about what Rose calls their "political and spiritual rape" by the Canadian government *[Mosaic* 21, Spring, 1988]. Naomi, for one, wishes to leave the past behind: "Crimes of history ... can stay in history." Her attitude of acceptance is, however, ultimately complicit with social oppression: her self-imposed silence feeds the one imposed from without. Naomi nonetheless learns that she cannot bracket the past, not only because it is impossible to do so, but also because it is self-destructive. "If you cut any of [your history] off you're an amputee," Emily warns. "Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream!"

What makes it especially difficult for Naomi to "scream" is her schooling in the protective and stoic silence of the issei, which she is gradually coming to regard with ambivalence She appreciates the efforts of Mother and Obasan to create a soothing environment for the children. She recollects Mother's reassuring manner during a childhood crisis, after she tells her that a big white hen is pecking a batch of infant yellow chicks to death (an event that clearly foreshadows the pending interracial dynamics). Mother comes immediately to the rescue: "With swift deft fingers, Mother removes the live chicks first, placing them in her apron. All the while that she acts, there is calm efficiency in her face and she does not speak." Obasan also exhibits serenity in the face of commotion. Even on the eve of the evacuation, "Aya is being very calm and she doesn't want any discussion in front of the kids. All she's told them is that they're going for a tram ride." An involuntary exodus is recast as a pleasant excursion-for the children's sake.

A point comes when such protective silence-a form of enforced innocence-infantilizes. Naomi, now an adult, is constantly frustrated by tightlipped Obasan: "The greater my urgency to know, the thicker her silences have always been." When Naomi asks her about the letters written in Japanese-letters describing the bombing in Nagasaki-Obasan produces instead an old photograph of Naomi and her mother, once more substituting a sweet image for harsh facts. Her silence can be as misleading as words.

The stoic silence of the issei is presented with a similar mixture of appreciation and criticism. The issei believe in quiet forbearance, in dignified silence. During the war they mustered enormous strength to swallow white prejudices, weather the ravages of the internment, and, above all, shelter the young as much as possible from physical and psychological harm. To the dominant culture their silence suggested passivity and

weakness, and encouraged open season on them. Kogawa capsulates these divergent perceptions of silence in two successive images from nature: "We are the silences that speak from stone... . We disappear into the future undemanding as dew."_ Stone connotes sturdiness, endurance, and impregnability; dew, by contrast, suggests fragility, evanescence, and vulnerability. Placed side by side, the two figures for silence reveal the complex attitude of the Japanese-Canadian narrator. She acknowledges the physical and inner strength of the issei: their sturdiness is a requisite to survival in taxing environments such as the ghost town of Slocan and the beet farm of Alberta The silence exemplified by Uncle and Obasan attests at once to their strength of endurance and their power to forgive. At the same time, the narrator knows all too well that their magnanimity-redoubled by their Christian belief in turning the other cheek-lends itself to exploitation by the dominant culture. Like dew, they can become "wiped out.'"

Kogawa does not allow the negative implications of silence to engulf its positive manifestations, of which the most disarming is attentive silence. Fujita notes that attendance is instilled in Naomi since infancy, through the very decor of her prewar home: "Above my bed With the powdery blue patchwork quilt is a picture of a little girl with a book in her lap, looking up into a tree where a bird sits. One of the child's hands is half raised as she watches and listens, attending the bird." The girl's heedfulness is significantly inseparable from her thoughtfulness and poised hand. Far from suggesting passivity, this form of silence entails both mental vigilance and physical readiness. Complementing the visual aids are the actual examples set by Grandma, Mother, and Obasan. They supply Positive reinforcement for Naomi. Their "alert and accurate knowing" has left a lasting impression on her:

When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food. If I am weary, every place is a bed A sweater covers me before there is any chill and if there is pain there is care simultaneously if Grandma Shifts uncomfortably, I bring her a cushion.

"Yoku ki ga tsuku ne," Grandma responds it is a statement in appreciation of sensitivity and appropriate gestures.

There is neither explicit request nor open inquiry. At the point when her grandparents have been taken to the hospital and Obasan offers unspoken yet palpable solace, Naomi registers: "We must always honour the wishes of others before our own To try to meet one's own needs in spite of the wishes of others is to be 'wagamama'-selfish and inconsiderate Obasan teaches me not to be wagamama by always heeding everyone's needs. That is why she is waiting patiently beside me at the bridge.'"

These instances trace attentive silence to a maternal tradition in Japanese culture. Naomi has learned it from Grandma, Mother, and her surrogate mother Obasan, all of whom have been raised in Japan. Yet it is also to be directed beyond one's kin, as is evident from what occurs on the train that takes Obasan and the children from British Columbia to Slocan. A young woman has given birth just before boarding, but she does not have a single baby item with her. Obasan quietly places in front of her a bundle that contains a towel and some fruit. Her kindness inspires another old woman to follow suit.

Little Naomi, taking stock of these generous acts, is herself moved to charity: she notices her brother's unhappiness and slips a present (her favorite ball) into his pocket.

Grandma and Mother disappear from Naomi's life early on. The extant person, in whom the woe and wonder of silence converge, influencing Naomi into adulthood, is Obasan. Kogawa has set her name as the title of the book because Obasan "is totally silent."' "If we never really see Obasan," the author has stated, "she will always be oppressed" [Wayne, *RIKKA,* 1981]. Kogawa realizes that Obasan's quiet fortitude makes her an easy target of subjugation, and she appeals openly to the reader to see Obasan and to hear "the silence that cannot speak" (epigraph). But she does not enjoin Obasan to emulate Emily. As readers, we must be wary of adopting the attitude of Stephen, who scorns Obasan's Japanese ways; or that of the chilling Mrs. Barker, whose "glance at Obasan is one of condescension."' Or we may be guilty of the very blindness that the author attempts to cure. Dismissing Obasan as a victim would legitimize her victimization.. ..

The narrator herself, unlike Stephen and Mrs. Barker, never regards Obasan arrogantly. She does not view her through Euro-centric or even revisionist eyes: "Obasan ... does not come from this clamorous climate. She does not dance to the multi-cultural piper's tune or respond to the racist's slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands."' In portraying her aunt she pointedly departs from the view of silence as absence or as impotence. She divines unspoken meanings beneath Obasan's reticence and wishes to enter "the vault of her thoughts."_ She textualizes the inaudible: "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."' The quietest character in the novel, Obasan is also the most attentive. (She performs what Wordsworth in "Tintem Abbey" eulogizes as those "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love."') One marked achievement of this novel is the finesse by which the author renders a wordless figure into an unforgettable character.

The destructive and enabling aspects of silence are recapitulated together in the climax of the novel. Naomi finally learns (from her grandma's letters) about her mother's disfigurement. Bewildered, she at first can only deplore her mother's protective silence: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction."' Yet almost in the same breath that remonstrates against protective silence the narrator is invoking attendance which, as Fujita observes, "supports Naomi in her moment of greatest need." The act ushers in the process of healing: "Gradually the room grows still and it is as if I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you."'

In this receptive state she hears "the sigh of ... remembered breath, a wordless word."' She is able to conjure up her mother's presence, and empathy restores the original bond: "Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there?" The communion continues:

I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here. The

letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs With dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves.

Naomi breathes life into the verbal knowledge transmitted by the letters ("bones only") by means of a nonverbal mode of apprehension. Her ability to grasp an absent presence through imaginative empathy is fostered by her sedulous heedfulness. She finally discovers the key to the cryptic epigraph: "To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence."'

Source: King-Kok Cheung, "Attentive Silence *Obasan,"* in her *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa,* Cornell University Press, 1994, pp. 126-167.

Critical Essay #3

White is an American educator and critic. In the following positive review, he praises Kogawa's depictions of suffering, injustice, and survival within the context of specific historical events in Obasan.

"Nisei," we learn from this extraordinary first novel, *[Obasan],* means "second generation," embracing the children of the Canadian and American first-generation immigrants from Japan. Everyone by now knows that the internment and theft of property suffered by Americans of Japanese descent during World War II represents a national disgrace second only to the massacres of Native Americans. It is a small comfort to realize that Canadian Nisei were treated at least as badly as the Americans, but the distance created by the Canadian setting perhaps will help make the pain this novel evokes more bearable for U.S. readers.

Joy Kogawa, a Canadian teacher and poet, has drawn upon her own experience as a displaced Canadian Nisei to write a unified story of a battered and broken family that endures under the worst conditions. The systematic outrages inflicted by the Canadian government on its own citizens echo the Nazi treatment of the Jews; the novel, in turn, shares some of the tone of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in its purity of vision under the stress of social outrage. This novel too has a magical ability to convey suffering and privation, inhumanity and racial prejudice, without losing in any way joy in life and in the poetic imagination.

The narrator is Naonil Nakane, now a 36-yearold teacher: "Marital status: Old maid. Health: Fine, I suppose Personality. Tense. Is that past or present tense? It's perpetual tense."' Like her author, Naomi was tom at the age of 5 from a warm and loving family inside a secure Japanese-Canadian culture in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Her mother is stranded in Japan, finally to encounter an atomic bomb, and her physician father's fragile health fails before the hardships of dispersal and brutal labor.

Naomi and her resentful brother Stephen (a musical prodigy) depend on their aunt, "Obasan," whose silence and strength form the solid center of the novel. The death of their uncle draws the family together, and draws Naomi's past into perspective as she reviews documents that expand her imperfect understanding of what has happened to her and her family. These documents include not only the diaries and notes collected by her irrepressible Aunt Emily, but a series of chilling nonfictional official papers and newspaper accounts.

Part of the strength of this novel is in its historical particularity, but another part is in its larger resonance: This is also an account of human barbarity wherever it occurs. This motif is made explicit early on in a description of Obasan:

Squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world You see her on a street corner in southern France, in a black dress and

black stockings Or bent over stone steps in a Mexican mountain village. Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite personal details.

"Now old," Obasan repeats; "everything old." The rhythms of the prose, when under extreme pressure, expand into Biblical patterns:

We are leaving the B.C coast-rain, cloud, mist and air overladen with weeping. Behind us lies a salty sea within which swim our drowning specks of memory-our small waterlogged eulogies. We are going down to the middle of the earth with pick-axe eyes, tunneling by train to the interior, carried along by the momentum of the expulsion into the waiting wilderness. We are the silences that speak from stone. We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication, a trainload of eyes covered with mud and spittle We are the man in the Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of the light.

The poetry remains quiet behind the prose, even as the universal theme radiates from the strong and driving plot. The story keeps unfolding, until its full sadness is complete. The next-to-last word is Nakane's:

This body of grief is not fit for human habitation Let there be flesh. The song of mourning is not a life long song../the wild roses and the tiny wild flowers grow along the trickling stream. The perfume in the air is sweet and faint if I hold my head a certain way, I can smell them from where I am.

The last word in the book is from the memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada in April, 1946. It points out that the orders-in-council for the deportation of Canadians of Japanese racial origin are "wrong and indefensible" and "are an adoption of the methods of Nazism." This protest was ignored by the government and by the world at large.

Kogawa's novel must be heard and admired; the art itself can claim the real last word, exposing the viciousness of the racist horror, embodying the beauty that somehow, wonderfully, survives.

Source: Edward M. White, "The Silences That Speak from Stone," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* July 11, 1982, p.3.

Topics for Further Study

Research the internment experience of people with Japanese ancestry in both Canada and the United States during World War II and compare them.

Who was Sitting Bull? In what ways is the experience of Sitting Bull's people similar to Naomi's family? In what ways was it different?

Do some research into the religion of Buddhism and then interpret some of the Buddhist references in Naomi's story. Is the narrator successful in blending Christianity and Buddhism?

If you were going to make *Obasan* into a film, how would you handle Grandma Kato's letter from Japan?

What Do I Read Next?

Kogawa's *Itsuka* (1992) continues the story of Naomi's family as they try to win redress from the Canadian government for the unjust internment.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) is the story of a Native American man trying to recover from his experience fighting in World War II for the U.S. Army in the Pacific against the Japanese. His nightmares involve the frightening idea that as a sometime enemy of Americans he was killing an enemy that looked like him. Eventually he is able to regain his mental health by returning to his tribe's traditions.

Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990) is a tale of another girl coming of age while dealing with sexual nightmares. Lucy's sexual secrets, like Naomi's, make the already difficult task of coming to womanhood as a racial minority all the more difficult.

An American who wrote of a character trying to restore the Japanese community to its pre-internment state was John Okada. His 1957 novel, *No-No Boy,* takes place in the United States.

Further Study

Cheng Lok Chua, "Witnessing the Japanese Canadian Experience in World War II. Processual Structure, Symbolism, and Irony in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan,"* in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America,* edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling, Temple University Press, 1992, pp 97-108.

This essay highlights the ritual structure and the "ironic narrative mode" of Kogawa's novel Chua also contends that *Obasan* "puts an Ironic question to the Christian ethics professed by Canada's majority culture."

Andrew Garrod, interview with Joy Kogawa, in *Speaking for Myself: Canadian Writers in Interview,* Breakwater (St. Johns, Newfoundland), 1986, pp. 139-53.

A lengthy interview in which Kogawa speaks revealingly about her childhood, her theological and political convictions, and her writing, especially her writing of *Obasan.*

Gurleen Grewal, "Memory and the Matrix of History: The Poetics of Loss and Recovery in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Toni Mornson's *Beloved,"* in *Memory and Cultural Politics. New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures,* edited by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr , and Robert E. Hogan, Northeastern University Press, 1996, pp. 140-74.

This essay draws useful comparisons between *Obasan* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as novels that "enact the process of loss and recovery" through "ceremonial performances of memory."

Rachelle Kanefsky, "Debunking a Postmodern Conception of History: A Defence of Humanist Values in the Novels of Joy Kogawa," in *Canadian Literature,* Vol. 148, Spring, 1996, pp 11-36.

In her "defence" of a humanist vision in Kogawa's novels, Kanefsky poses a direct challenge to Critics who interpret those novels in terms of postmodern views of history and language. Kanefsky contends that both Kogawa and her protagonist finally support a humanist conviction that "What's right is right. What's wrong is wrong".

Joy Kogawa, "Is There a Just Cause?," in *Canadian Forum,* March, 1984, pp 20-24.

In this compelling editorial, Kogawa Writes of her own involvement in and understanding of social activism, affirming "the paradoxical power in mutual vulnerability" and arguing that "our wholeness comes from joining and from sharing our brokenness".

Joy Kogawa, "What Do I *Remember* of the Evacuation," in *Chicago Review,* Vol 42, No. 3-4, 1996, pp. 152-53.

This poem, originally published in 1973, offers an intriguing glimpse at Kogawa's reflections about the evacuation several years before she wrote *Obasan.*

Like the later novel, this poem draws its expressive force from an ironic juxtaposition of "adult" realities and childhood perceptions.

Maryka Oniatsu, *Bittersweet Passage: Redress and the Japanese Canadian Experience,* Between the Lines, nd.

Records the struggle of Japanese Canadians to obtain redress from the Canadian government.

Edward Said, *Orientalism,* Random House, 1979.

Said details the history of the way in which the Western powers view eastern or oriental people In other words, It is a history of stereotypes and the attitudes enabling policies like internment.

Ann Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism. The Uprooting of Japanese-Canadians During the Second World War,* Lorimer, 1981.

A detailed work on the event of Canadian internment. It is a work that Aunt Emily would appreciate for its careful documentation.

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance,* Princeton University Press, 1993.

Wong offers compelling "intratextual" and "intertextual" readings of *Obasan* in this study of Asian American literature, focusing in particular on Kogawa's use of the "stone bread" Image and her "obsession with mobility" in the novel

Mitsuye Yamada, "Experiential Approaches to Teaching Joy Kogawa's *Obasan,"* in *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures: Nineteen Essays,* edited by John R Maitino and David R. Peck, University of New Mexico Press, 1996, pp 293-311.

Though primarily intended for teachers, this essay presents a useful model for reading Kogawa's novel through three different frames' "the aesthetic, the historical, and the experiential."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of �classic� novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members�educational professionals� helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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