

# Obasan: dehumanization embodied through the imagery of animals essay sample

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In today's contemporary civilization, there is an unfailing output of dehumanization. This has resulted from the common issue of racism which our world has been dealing with for a myriad of years. Racism is defined as a discriminatory act based upon the intolerance of those from a different race. This act of hatred is often found to be based on false beliefs and is therefore considered to be extremely unjust. This theme of dehumanization is constantly seen throughout Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* in which she uses many images of animals in order to allegorically symbolize the hardships which Naomi's family is put through. These images of spiders, kittens, and especially chickens closely relate to the destitution of human beings during the outbreak of World War II.

The two spiders which Naomi and Obasan discover while fumbling through the attic are symbolic of the dreadful memories that Naomi experienced as a child. Naomi reacts to these spiders in a similar manner as to which she reacts to the memories of her childhood. Once she discovers these spiders, she is repulsed and in fear just as she is repulsed by the memories which she discovers throughout the novel. Naomi has been affected by many people throughout her lifetime. This includes her mother's abandonment as well as the sexual abuse of Old Man Gower. The reminiscences of such events in her life bring forth emotions which are quite dark and depressing. Another interpretation of the two spiders can be seen as the dehumanization which is set upon the Japanese-Canadians by the white Canadians. The second spider appears to be "lighter in colour, its legs more muscular, striped and tapered" (25) and seems to be aggressive with the first, darker spider. This suggests dominance of the second spider, which is viewed as the white

Canadian, over the first spider which is viewed as the Japanese-Canadian. And just like these spiders in the attic, these memories will doubtlessly stay in Naomi's life until the day that she passes.

The horrific image of the kitten being trapped underneath the outhouse corresponds with the repulsive issue of racism which is consistently brought forth in the novel *Obasan*. Naomi is wrongly accused by a girl with white, fine hair, who happens to be the owner of the kitten, of having thrown it into the outhouse. The fact that the white-haired girl does not even attempt to help her kitten is quite bent. "The kitten cries day after day, not quite dead... covered in slime and feces" (172). There is no one around to help the kitten and, eventually, it is forgotten. This image is parallel to that of the Canadian government bringing the Japanese-Canadians into concentration camps in attempt to get rid of them. Just as the kitten cried for help, the Japanese-Canadians cried for justice and to be treated equally among all other Canadians. Aunt Emily is an example of those who tried to act against the mistreatment of the Japanese-Canadians. She argued with the government by sending letters but never seemed to receive the acknowledgment that she was requesting.

Kogawa uses the image of young chicks and a hen to enhance the theme of deprivation for the Japanese-Canadians as they are striped of their human qualities. During this particular event, Naomi places a dozen chicks, one by one, into a cage where the hen is kept. With no warning or reason for its action, the hen begins to brutally attack the chicks. It consistently starts jabbing its beak down on them "deliberate as the needle on the sewing

machine" (62-63). By Naomi placing the chicks slowly into the cage, it symbolizes the Japanese slowly immigrating to Canada and, without the Japanese having done anything wrong, they are humiliated and ostracized merely because of their differences in appearance. Even though the Japanese-Canadians were not necessarily killed by the white Canadians as the chicks were by the hen, they were still treated with tremendous degradation. They were dehumanized by the Canadians as they were sent to the concentration camps and forced to live like animals in what had once been a chicken coop.

The torturing of chickens is used in the novel *Obasan* to not only show the racism of the Canadians but to also show the anger which the Japanese community possesses because of the suffering that they are put through. For this image, several Japanese-Canadian schoolboys are gathered together and are working towards killing a white chicken. These young boys are filled with such resentment and rage as they take pleasure in this gruesome act. Simply killing the poor animal is not enough for them; they've "got to make it suffer" (169). They cut its throat, squished its head, and let it bleed slowly as it struggled for its life. This shows the intenseness and the effects of the hardships which these boys were put through in order to become so destructive. However this particular image can be seen in reverse as the chicken is seen as the Japanese people and the schoolboys as the Canadians. In this case, the white Canadians are making the Japanese-Canadians suffer instead of just killing or deporting them as this would put a damper on the Canadian image.

Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* uses images of different animals to show the connection between the way these animals were treated and viewed and that of the way human beings were treated after the unfortunate bombing at Pearl Harbour. Naomi comes across many feared memories of her childhood as she and her family are discriminated upon and mistreated because of their race. This act of racism is still commonly used in today's society. The reasons as to why this act is still practised are completely unfounded. There is no true excuse for it. People should not look at each community and decipher whether it is good or bad. Instead, they should merely accept the differences and embrace them.

#### References:

Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. Random House, Inc., 1994.