

# "obasan" by joy kogawa essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



## **“ Obasan” by Joy Kogawa Essay Sample**

“ Obasan” by Joy Kogawa is a novel telling the story of Naomi Nakane, a Japanese Canadian, during the Japanese Internment in British Columbia during the war in the 1940’s. This story tells us of the hardships that these people have experienced during those trying times and how it has affected the different aspects of their lives. The book tells a compelling story of life under discriminating circumstances that the government they are under impose upon them. It relates to us experiences of people who are in a situation whose exists as not part of the whole but at the same time are not considered as part of their community. This paper aims to explore the circumstances of Naomi’s identity as a Japanese Canadian during times of war and discrimination and how it affected her search for identity and reason

The novel combined documented history and a collection of personal experiences to better explain the situation that the Japanese Canadians had to experience. It is both a recollection and historic review of the events that happened in British Columbia during the time that they had considered them as threats to national security and thus action taken against them changed to become cruel and oppressive. Those who suffered during this time had the problem of not being heard, of an enduring “ wordlessness”, that is both chosen and inflicted.

The novel explores the existence of a collective memory and citizenship in the Japanese Canadian society whose foundations lie in their citizenships: that of Japanese and that of Canadian. These two cultures were made to have been reconciled in the story where this hybrid citizenship caused them

to suffer. They have become different and were considered as "others" in the country because they were living in a place and era where one side of their citizenship was at conflict with each other. This can be seen both in the internal conflicts that happen within Naomi where she was struggling to make sense of both cultures within her and the social environment she was enduring during that time. She lived during the World War II where Japanese was at war with the western world. Her Japanese heritage was seen as a threat by her Canadian society where she eventually finds herself lost since and confused since she has become a foreigner in her own country since they began to treat those who were like her differently.

Naomi Nakane is of Japanese Canadian Nationality. She lived together with her family away from Japan in the British Columbian territories. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, an event that started the war, it resulted in a change in the way that the people around them viewed them. They began to be seen as enemies that need to be treated with caution and separated from the rest of the society. They were seen as threats that need to be suppressed lest the rest of the society become endangered. Thus they were relocated and transferred in the governmental guise of "protection" and their own imposed "volunteerism". They were discriminated against by the government taking away their properties and forced to work in labor camps under difficult living conditions where they had to work in order to just get by. Those who were sick were left to die in the camps. Those who were unable to work were separated and imprisoned in the different areas.

One of the great conflicts in the novel is found in the concept of dual citizenship of the main characters of the story. The culture of Japanese and Canadian are in conflict within the main characters and she attempts to understand and reconcile both. A theme in the novel discusses the silence of those who have the same heritage as her as seen in her obasan and the vocal self assertion shown by her aunt. She eventually viewed this as one of the main difference of the two cultures. This gave a perspective into both cultures where most of the Japanese Canadian citizens in her stories were silent while there are those who like the western culture that they have assimilated into their own were more vocal and self assertive. In this way we see that Naomi was a combination of both sides where she uses her silence to better understand the situation she endures through her observation of the different instances that she finds herself in.

On the other hand she also embraces the vocal as she converses and explores with other people their interpretation of their situation. She realizes that somehow the current situation that they were experiencing was brought about by their culture's silence. The disabling silence was compared to victimized animals who choose to be silence because they were distrustful of the others, especially those who are in power. Their silence is a means of protection against the possible conflicts and repercussions that they might be drawing upon themselves. As the novel progresses, Naomi becomes more conscious of the language that she was using and the effect it eventually has over the people. Silence in the novel also shows shame and trauma directed towards their history. The novel shows that silence cannot be the answer since it only hides the past where it is nurtured and made to grow. The use

of being vocal prevents people from being ignorant and fearful since it is a channel for understanding.

Throughout the novel we will see that there are various questions that are asked by the different characters only to find them unanswered. These unanswered questions continue to be asked throughout the story. It continues to follow them until eventually the answers become clear. The realization in the novel that questions will continue to haunt them no matter how much they run away from them is apparent throughout the novel. We will also see that the silence of not answering questions prevents actions that eventually bring about regret and misunderstandings. Only through looking for answers can one truly find reconciliation to the unanswered questions and the situation that they find themselves in.

Naomi realizes when she was young that " death means to stop" (Kogawa). This was shown again as she realizes that the Japanese word for " lost" is also the same word to describe death. She realizes that an end to something also means death. Her mother died when she stopped protecting them, her father died when he stopped responding to the letters. This, combine it with Kogawa's use of the concept of bone could signify that there is a core, an essential part, a substance that lasts even though it becomes non-existent. The novel shows this by her understanding that " for a child there is no presence without flesh" but she realizes that this is not the case especially since she realizes that there are other things or other meanings hidden beneath the events that are happening. This part of the novel also shows a change in Naomi as she begins to become mature where her ability to better

understand the situations that the Japanese Canadian people are suffering. The concept of a core or a hidden truth can again be seen in the part where Emily and Naomi were digging up bones. This signifies that they were also digging up the " truth" or a bigger, deeper understanding of their current situation.

They have found that the Japanese Canadians were since been treated as " a mass of buried bones" by the society that they were living in. This gives the bones another symbolism and that the Japanese Canadian population during the time of the internment was bones that were " buried" or hidden from view and thought of not being important, useless and feared. It becomes a symbolism to the readers that the concept and the lives of the living Japanese Canadian people during this time has become the same as the view of bones. That their concept has become flesh and the truth propagated has become " flesh". (Shoenut)

Language in the novel is used as a weapon to hide the real situation of the Japanese Canadian population by the individuals in position. Naomi was taught this by her aunt Emily when they explored news and documents that show that the government is lying about the real state of the Japanese Canadian Community. The purpose of which is to hide their real circumstances of these people and to legitimize and rationalize their action towards them. It also makes for easier implementation without the risk of conflict coming from the population who do not agree with their actions.

This led Naomi to become critical and more vocal about their state of living where she realizes that history was not truth rather it is an interpretation of

certain events and activities that are happening around them. Those who are giving the interpretations are those who are in power and thus the voices of the minorities are not being heard or at least even presented. Her Japanese Canadian descent became the reason for this realization where she eventually turns to become critical of the historical accounts. This then pushed her to understand history should not be taken as truth but should be taken as literature that needs to be deconstructed in order to find the truth hidden within truth.

Language in the novel also plays a significant role in the understanding of the concept of identity of the Japanese Canadian people. It stands as a part of their identities where its destruction also means the destruction of their heritage. The novel shows a fragmentation of their language and culture where it says that the Japanese Canadian language is fragmented into three parts, " part Japanese, part English, part Sasquatch". This shows one of the central themes of the novel and that which is the search of the Japanese Canadian identity. Their culture and society is fragmented since their society is based on two very different cultures. It becomes difficult for them to situate themselves since they have become confused about their collective identity.

Their separation was also symbolic of this fragmentation shown where their family was divided and separated. This becomes a greater problem when the society that they are living in continues to fragment the different aspects of their identity. This eats away their ability for solidarity that they need to exhibit especially the growing turbulent times of the novel. They were

compared to the stone that are chiseled away and become " fragments of fragments". This eventually implies the fear that they be reduced into nothing if they do not find for themselves a protection from the continued fragmentation of their culture and identities that will help them keep their bonds together. This becomes a bigger issue during the start of the war and the imposition of the internment. (Grice) (Shoenut)

During the Japanese Canadian Internment, the Japanese Canadian population was no longer considered a part of the society. They were looked upon as enemies and they were treated as such. They were forced to work for cheap labor, those who are no longer able to work are imprisoned, those who were sick were left to die, they were deprived of some of their freedom and their properties were confiscated by the government. They also lost the protection of the government and the justice system and they have also experienced many other injustices in the hands of those who consider them as the " others". Many families were also separated from each other including the family of Naomi. During this time they also suffered severe discrimination since it was widely spread that the Japanese were the ones who started the war. They were considered as evil and bad and this further created a gap between Japanese Canadians and the " others" who constitute the majority of the population of the country. This pushed many of the Japanese Canadian populations, including Naomi's brother, to embrace western culture and forget their Japanese roots in order to find protection from discrimination and abuse. (Shoenut)



The Naomi towards the end of the novel professes her loyalty to Canada saying that she is a citizen of Canada. That her loyalties lie with her and that she is part of the great country even though its people and its government has turned its back against them despite their having to endure continued suffering during those times, she was still willing to forgive them for the things that they have done to them and also hopeful at the same time that one day they would be able to return to the country's loving embrace no longer discriminated and hated but as members of their society.

Naomi, being of Japanese Canadian descent, is faced with a difficult situation regarding the question of her identity. She was living in a world that does not consider them part of their society. It becomes clear however, that during the times of suffering, her hope has still not gone out. Her loyalty and love towards Canada are unwavering even after all the things that they have gone through. The novel is a kind of semi-autobiography of the author and her experiences during the difficult times she and her fellow Japanese Canadians faced. Her work reflected her views during those times.

The idea of Naomi being a hybrid figure did not create a new cultural entity of its own in the novel though it did serve as a powerful tool for the reconciliation of her past and of her present. She viewed her past as necessary occurrences without which she would not have a clear understanding of her own identity. She understood that her past, pertaining to her traditional Japanese roots, is part of her present and she chose the Canada. Through the analysis of the novel we will see that the suffering that

she had to endure came from the existence of mixed blood within her but she was already loyal to Canada thus there is little to say that her hybridity has become her own cultural entity. This rather shows that her hybridity is simply an obstacle to overcome if she wanted to become accepted as a citizen of the country that she loved. (Shoenut)

The silent ways of obasan and the mastery of speech as shown by Aunt Emily show the difference that both cultures react to their environments. The silence shows guard and protection while mastery of speech shows liberation and freedom. It shows a problematic middle ground that need to be overcome.

#### Bibliography

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