

Kogawa's depiction of internment camps in obasan



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In the novel *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa, the narrator recounts her experience of being relocated to the internment camps during the Second World War.

During this time period the Japanese Canadians were considered enemies to all. Consequently, they were treated unfairly, and at times, even brutally.

Kogawa sets her excerpt during the 1940s in British Columbia to emphasize the relations between the Japanese Canadians and society. Society, in Kogawa's excerpt, represents a place where Japanese Canadians are hated due to the actions of their country. Specifically, this action refers to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, which takes place right before the excerpt is set. This setting establishes conflict because society does not allow the Japanese Canadians to express themselves as individuals: human beings that are not associated with a collective group. Instead, the Japanese Canadians are oppressed, or treated unfairly because they are seen as an enemy by society. Kogawa employs a first-person plural narration in order to give the reader a direct insight to the thoughts and feelings of a Japanese Canadian living in this time period. Thus, the reader is able to see and feel everything as if it were happening this very moment. This point of view allows the reader to not sympathize, but rather understand the struggles of the Japanese Canadians. Through the use of various literary elements such as point of view, structure, selection of detail, and figurative language, Kogawa suggests that the narrator's complex attitude toward the past stems from her inability to assimilate into a society in which she is seen as an enemy. For the narrator to transcend this feeling of rejection, Kogawa indicates that she must draw from the love and support of others, which in turn will give the narrator a sense of belonging and independence. Kogawa begins her excerpt by establishing the time period in order to emphasize to <https://assignbuster.com/kogawas-depiction-of-interment-camps-in-obasan/>

the reader that there is conflict; through this conflict Kogawa suggests that the narrator views the past with disdain due to the fact that she is seen as an enemy by society. Kogawa says " 1942" (Kogawa line 1) in order to highlight the importance of the time period: the Japanese have recently bombed Pearl Harbor and it is the middle of the Second World War. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, all Americans with Japanese descent were put in internment camps after fear of further attacks by the Japanese. During their time in the internment camps, the Japanese Canadians were isolated from society, resulting in their loss of identity, or the characteristics that make one unique. This lack of identity amongst the Japanese Canadians caused society to stereotype them as an enemy; thus, all Japanese Canadians were viewed with contempt. The Japanese Canadians' imprisonment at the hands of the Canadian government indicates that those in power, in this circumstance the Canadian government, have the power to determine morality. Kogawa goes on to say that "[w]e 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" (lines 5-8) to underline a sense of desolation for the Japanese Canadians because they recognize the severity of their circumstances. Kogawa alludes to the Bible, specifically talking about the exile of the Israelis. The " waiting wilderness" the narrator refers to can be seen as an extended metaphor, for it represents the internment camps the Japanese Canadians will be relocated to. They do not know what to expect when they arrive at the internment camps. The narrator views this " wilderness" with a sense of inevitability because she knows that she is powerless in refusing to go to the internment camps. This quote also presents an irony because although the Japanese Canadians understand the

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severity of their predicament, they know that they are unable to do anything to alter it. Through this irony Kogawa presents the Japanese Canadians as tolerant, or accepting of their dilemma because they do not attempt to change a hopeless situation. Kogawa indicates that the narrator's quiet tolerance of her situation constitutes for much of her hard feelings toward the past because now she is finally able to reflect on such atrocities. Through the use of figurative language, Kogawa is able to convey her message that the events of the past shape the way Japanese Canadians view themselves in the present moment, which in turn illuminates the fact that because of the past, the Japanese Canadians struggle to find a sense of identity. This paradox has an adverse affect on the Japanese Canadians, for it implies that due to the past, the Japanese Canadians are in an unstable state of mind because they are viewed as enemies to all. Consequently, the Japanese Canadians are unable to develop a sense of individuality, or uniqueness because their surrounding environment hinders their ability to do so by isolating them in the internment camps. The anaphora " we are", which is repeated eleven times throughout the excerpt, reoccurs to remind the reader of the struggles that the Japanese Canadians endure as a group. By starting each paragraph with " we are" in the first part of the excerpt, Kogawa signifies that the Japanese Canadians see themselves as a collective group rather than distinct individuals, which in turn reveals that the Japanese Canadians all share the common hardship of assimilating into society as individuals. Furthermore, Kogawa uses the simile "[w]e disappear into the future undemanding as dew" (lines 27-28) to compare the Japanese Canadians to dew. This simile evokes a feeling of hopelessness for the future because the Japanese are helpless against being relocated to the internment

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camp. This simile can also be seen as an extended metaphor, for it symbolizes the plight of all Japanese Canadians during this time period. They are all powerless in stopping their inevitable relocation to the internment camps. Furthermore, Kogawa does not use dialogue during the Japanese Canadians' train ride to the internment camps. This gives the impression that the train ride is completely silent, which emphasizes the Japanese Canadians' quiet tolerance of their situation. Rather than use dialogue to describe the situation, Kogawa opts to use imagery. She describes the train by saying: "The train smells of oil and soot and orange peels and lurches groggily as we rock our way inland. Along the window ledge, the black soot leaps and settles like insects" (lines 46-48). The narrator gives the reader a detailed description of the train in order to accentuate what it was like to be on the train going to the internment camp. She uses personification to compare the "black soot" to "insects", which again shows how the use of figurative language allows the reader to witness firsthand what it is like to be a Japanese Canadian living during this time period. Through her detailed description of the train ride to the internment camps, the narrator reveals one of the many hardships the Japanese Canadians faced during their relocation to the internment camps. By using figurative language, Kogawa is able to express the despair of the Japanese Canadians by indicating that they are aware of their bleak situation, yet they know they are powerless in changing it. Midway through the excerpt Kogawa transitions from a first-person plural to a first-person singular point of view to allow the reader to see the situation through the perspective of the narrator as an individual as opposed to a collective group; through this change in point of view the reader is able to understand the hardships that the Japanese Canadians

endured directly. The narrator first describes a child noticing concrete details in order to emphasize the change in point of view. She says: " A pile of luggage in a large hall. Missionaries at the railway station handing out packages of toys" (lines 29-31). The child only notices concrete images because he is young; his mind has not developed to the extent of an adult. This change in point of view contrasts the varying perspectives of the Japanese Canadians on their relocation. The fact that the child is oblivious to being relocated and only noticing the obvious highlights the importance of perception. While the child may not see anything significant in being relocated to the internment camps, the view of an adult completely contradicts this. Obasan, for example, completely comprehends the gravity of the situation. In changing the point of view, Kogawa suggests that one's perception plays a major role in their overall outlook on life. The narrator does not look at the past with fondness because from her standpoint, there is nothing worthwhile to remember. Furthermore, Kogawa uses the literary technique of flashback, which not only highlights the change in point of view, but also provides the reader with a direct insight to the conflict. " It is three decades ago and I am a small child resting my head in Obasan's lap" (lines 33-34). The narrator reflects on when she was a child going to the internment camps. This flashback allows the reader to see the events unfold through the eyes of the narrator. The reader can thus feel everything as if it was happening this very moment. Through the use of the literary technique of flashback, Kogawa is able to emphasize the change in point of view from first person plural to first person singular, which in turn allows the reader to see the action unfold through the eyes of the narrator. Kogawa implies that the conditions in the internment camps are so poor that many Japanese

Canadians do not make it out alive and that those that do are negatively impacted by their experiences there forever; through this indication Kogawa suggests that the chief reason for the narrator's complicated attitude toward the past comes from the fact that her harrowing experiences at the internment camp will always be with her. The narrator reflects: " Not one uncle or aunt, grandfather or grandmother, brother or sister, not one of us on this journey returns home again" (lines 43-45). This quotation can be interpreted in two ways. First, from a physical perspective, as it is possible that the narrator's family all dies while in the internment camp. Second, it can be seen from a mental viewpoint, for the narrator suggests that the experience of being in an internment camp for such a long time drastically affects the psychological morale of the Japanese Canadians. Many Japanese Canadians were in the internment camps for as long as four years, during which they were under extreme emotional stress. The ones who made it out alive would have to deal with the psychological trauma associated with being imprisoned for so long. The narrator recognizes that these experiences will be with her forever; therefore, she does not look to the past with nostalgia, but rather the complete opposite as she tries to forget it entirely. Kogawa ends her excerpt on an optimistic note to show that in desperate times, solace can be found through the kind actions of others, which in turn illuminates that one can use the love and support of others to overcome the toughest of situations. Kogawa says: " Obasan hands me an orange from a wicker basket and gestures towards Kuniko-san, indicating that I should take her the gift. But I pull back" (86-88). Obasan wants the narrator to give Kuniko-san oranges because she realizes that Kuniko-san is poor. When the narrator is hesitant to do so, Obasan takes the situation into her own hands.

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“ Clutching the top of Kuniko-san’s seat with one hand, Obasan bows and holds the furoshiki out to her. Kuniko-san clutches the baby against her breast and bows forward twice while accepting Obasan’s gift without looking up” (lines 95-99). These last lines of the excerpt underline Obasan’s selflessness. Although the gift of apples and oranges is a seemingly small deed, it makes a world of difference to Kuniko-san. Obasan makes a sacrifice by giving Kuniko-san the apples and oranges. By doing so, Obasan puts the need of others in front of her own. In this instance Kogawa wants the reader to see the big picture, as she conveys that the kind actions of others make the most dreadful of experiences into a more bearable one. Obasan’s action epitomizes the resolve of the Japanese Canadians and the undying pride that allowed them to cope with the injustices brought upon them. Through the generous action of Obasan, the narrator is able to see that one small act of kindness can make an immense difference on one’s outlook of life. In ending her excerpt on a positive note, Kogawa notes that although the narrator does not look at the past with fondness, she can reflect on Obasan’s selfless act as one of the few moments that she will always remember because it unifies the Japanese Canadians as one by suggesting that they all share a common struggle. Through their experience of being relocated to the internment camps, the Japanese Canadians endure hardship upon hardship. Though from the perspective of the Japanese Canadians this imprisonment was unjust and their subsequent treatment ruthless, Kogawa presents them as tolerant and resolute. Through the use of the narrator, Kogawa suggests that the actions of the Canadian government strip the Japanese Canadians of their individuality. For them to find a sense of belonging and independence, Kogawa reveals that they must transcend their hopeless situation through

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the love and support of each other. Although the narrator does not look to the past with nostalgia, Kogawa implies that she is nevertheless satisfied because the benevolent actions of others allow her to find a sense of identity that she would not have found otherwise.