The Voice of Silence in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*

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Abstract

Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* draws on the theme of breaking silence and finding speech as a powerful device to address the absence of Naomi’s voice. That is to say, *Obasan* presents the conflict of silence that cannot speak. Naomi, being brought up in a hostile environment, experiences the struggles of the past and being voiceless. Gradually, Naomi finds herself wandering and achieving nothing. Unable to express her feelings, Naomi stays mostly speechless in her life. To a great degree, she remains traumatized and repressed until she speaks of her own voice. Later, in tracing the absence of her mother, Naomi finds that her mother’s voice must be revived rather than simply recorded in a letter. Apparently, the novel has moved from muteness to a spoken voice. Near the end of the journey, as Naomi stands looking at the coulee in the early prairie dawn, she has transformed her antipathy into love and finding her own voice. At best, Naomi’s choice of speaking is her way out of silence and applying her voice moves her toward a better future.

Keywords: Silence, Voice, Secret, Trauma
論喬依・小川《歐巴桑》中傾聽沉黙的聲音

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摘要

本論文旨在探討喬依・小川《歐巴桑》中被迫沉默有話不能說出及壓抑內心聲音的困境。主角娜歐密因日裔身份在第二次世界大戰被拘留在集中營因而內心留下創傷，導致無法為自己發聲。娜歐密總是默然不語因她遺忘了如何表達自己的聲音和權利。為跳脫壓迫，娜歐密必須走出傷痛的過去並且大聲宣示自己的聲音。在尋找失蹤的母親中，娜歐密也明白了傾聽信中母親沈默的微弱聲音之重要性。所以當娜歐密再次站在大草原看著深谷時，她已透過與自己和母親的對話，找到屬於自己靈魂的聲音。娜歐密更學習到了相信自己與為心底發聲吶喊。最後娜歐密也從一開始的有口難言進而尋得自己最真實的聲音和熱愛生命的力量。

關鍵字：沉默、聲音、秘密、創傷
Obasan is historical in that it offers a vivid account of what Japanese Canadians endured and experienced during World War II and the extreme pain involved in the breaking up of families and communities. Joy Kogawa was six—one year older than the novel’s narrator, Naomi—when her family was forced to move. Kogawa and the narrator in the novel, share similar experiences in which they are sent into exile to an imprisonment camp. Kogawa, like Naomi, had been as silent as stone and thus acknowledges the pain of wordlessness. Kogawa’s work represents the typical perspective of the survivors especially in relation to the internment: “From silence and suffering, to voice and resolution, this novel is about survival, multicultural style” (Day 6). Kogawa explains that she had to write her story to make sense of her life. In fact, Naomi seals her lips on the shame of being abused by Old Gower. He makes Naomi live through miserable trauma without a voice to utter her suffering: “The novel depicts the plight of a child who does not know and cannot tell” (Cheung 131). Moreover, Aunt Emily’s hidden package appears, to be a puzzle to Naomi because she cannot read Japanese. This package has been hidden in the dark attic, compelled to the long buried silence just like Naomi for years. Despite the absence of her mother Naomi later understood the greatness of her love for she chose to impose silence to protect her children. Clearly, in Obasan the sense that words can imprison as well as release is a keystone to the work. At best, Kogawa turns silence into sounds and places emphasis on the need to speak up and also to be heard.

Kogawa examines the consequences of silence and speech. The lyrical opening establishes the link between speaking and silence. Obasan presents on one level an historical mystery and riddle which revolves around Naomi’s missing mother. The book begins with an epigraph that describes the suffering of the Japanese Canadians: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna and will give him a white stone and in the stone a new name written” (Kogawa). Kogawa presents how cruelly Japanese Canadians were treated during the internment of World War II. This beginning draws attention simultaneously to the question of Japanese Canadians’ identity. Kogawa
speaks of the truth which is more complex than the known factual truth. Clearly, at the beginning, Kogawa describes how Japanese Canadians should fight against the odds and overcome the obstacles of the internment: “Before this could happen, however, she should trace the hidden voice to the underground stream. The union between the stone and the living waters will produce the magic of life, and the seed shall flower with speech” (Gottlieb 35). The spiritual meaning of this epigraph is that through their suffering God shall give them wisdom and his celestial love. Moreover, the white stone stands for truth and blessings. Thus, the truth about Japanese Canadians suffering should be told and “Only by overcoming the trial of being lost in the desert of fear and hatred, only by overcoming the terrors of the Apocalypse, will one be led to the Tree of Life to the hidden manna of spiritual nourishment” (Gottlieb 34). Most of all, God will grant them blessings and good things to come in the future. In addition, they will be given joy such as they had not before. Hence, God has not forgotten the Japanese Canadian people and will favor them in the future.

Obasan begins with the story by revealing the sound and horror of silence. Naomi signifies the agony of being denuded to speak: “Naomi, then, is presented as an incomplete person and a sterile person in the opening lines of the novel, and her journey in Obasan is toward seeing the error of the ways these elders with their false code of silence” (Rose 294). The memory of traumatic events during the internment can be lost in silence. As the work presents an actual battle with silence, the pen gives voice to the sound of silence:

The generally accepted reading of Obasan follows the surface of Naomi’s telling to discover a therapeutic narrative in which a woman, pathologically silenced by the multiple traumas of sexual molestation, mother’s abandonment, political internment and the condition of the Japanese culture of silence, finds her voice and comes to writing. (Banerjee 101)

Unable to know where her missing mother is, Naomi lives on the margin without an independent identity and becomes exiled spiritually, her thoughts drifting in a no-man’s land. Though Naomi kept asking her family about her mother’s and grandmother’s disappearance no one
would speak a word about them. Due to the long-term silence, Naomi nearly forgets how to speak. Later on Naomi comes to recognize that to be quiet like Obasan and Uncle is to be portrayed as a victim. Naomi attempts to find and ask about her mother but all her importunities are in vain. Naomi sees the silence of Obasan as majestic but also favors Aunt Emily’s ability to speak. When the sufferings of the silent Japanese Canadians are articulated in English, this dead silence is transformed into meaningful utterances.

In the beginning of Obasan, Japanese Canadians could not speak and had to remain in silence. These past awful memories do not bear remembering neither can they bear to be told. Silence is cultivated to its full in the beginning of the novel. The loss of utterance means not only dangers but also sadness:

There is silence that cannot speak. There is silence that will not speak. Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from the amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone.

(Kogawa)

Without a voice, the narrator Naomi finds it impossible to speak and thus her words are like stone: “Naomi is torn between her sense of Canadian and Japanese identities and their value systems” (Ty 12). From her traumatic sufferings, Naomi resists speaking. Owing to the loss of speaking, Naomi lives in complete silence: “Naomi is dis-located, metaphorically placed in the rubble of a disintegrated narrative/family home . . . ” (Jones 217). Therefore, Naomi has to learn to speak for the truth verbally, and must be willing to say the words on her lips. Without the discursive power of speech there can be no knowing or communication. Later on, Naomi relates to this silence with her dreams. At first, Naomi proves unable to speak and listen to her surroundings. There are subjects of silence that no one will talk of thus Naomi grew up in a silent world of her own. Not only does Naomi live in a world without sound she has in a way become stone-deaf. Naomi eventually concludes that the silence of her family ceases to be protective.
Stone, a recurrent image in the work, denotes forced silence and wordless silence. “I hate the stillness, I hate the stone. I hate the sealed vault with its cold icon. I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes” (Kogawa). In this passage, Naomi reveals how she hates the feeling of being imprisoned in a world of silence. The stillness she feels in her surrounding seems to suffocate her and, moreover, this calmness cannot bring her comfort; instead, it enhances her vulnerability. Naomi must break the stony silence if she hopes to have a future: “Without discourse there can be no identity” (Goellnicht 301). In fact, this stillness implies no motion or movement, no growth or progress, which drags Naomi down. Naomi undergoes the suffering of emptiness and has no replies to questions she desperately wants answered. In all, this silence develops into muteness. Naomi heard only whispers and silence among the adults. No one told her and Stephen what had happened and why they had to move. So Naomi wonders what good silence brings her.

Moreover, the silence grew within her, bringing difficulty with the verbalization of her suffering. Obasan kept the pain in her and was unwilling to tell the children about the death of their mother. “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” (Kogawa 17). In contrast to Aunt Emily, Obasan is as quiet as the windless sea; Obasan’s love indicates the presence of Mother’s love for the children. Though Naomi is frustrated by this silence, more importantly, she finds intimacy and tenderness from Obasan: “Language alone can free Naomi and, by extension, her people’s story. To break the stone of silence, Naomi must learn the truth, command the language, and reveal the facts that have made her and her people outsiders in their own chosen homeland” (Andrews 57). This realization helps Naomi to come to terms with the past and recover her affirmation of life with new answers and goals.

When the persecution began for the Japanese people, Obasan and other family members said nothing of it to the children, so that Naomi only learned of the oppression from deep whispers. Still wondering about events of the past, Naomi urgently tries to put the puzzle pieces of
The Voice of Silence in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*

[Naomi] seeks answers but gets no feedback. “If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply” (Kogawa). Such narration demonstrates the nuances of such silence and Naomi’s multiple struggles as a member of the Japanese Canadian female minority. Naomi urgently seeks to find the hidden voice that can free her from the pain of being in silence. However, she hears no response and silence accompanies her relentlessly. Growing up in solitude and silence, Naomi loses the ability to communicate with others and indulges in silence. In the narration, the characters stay mute but their love and hearts are tied tightly closed. Naomi later on realizes that silence in fact presents a discursive strategy: “Not until the end of the novel will she find the answers” (Gottlieb 35). Though silence surrounds Naomi, eventually she will comprehend that silence implicates a far richer vastness than what words can express. The truth hidden from her over the years cannot be approached through language, nor can it be apprehended through a simple speech. Thus, the pursuit of silence in fact leads to an opposition and resistance to silence. Naomi’s silence acts not just as a form of passive suffering, but an active survival tactic as well as a method to prompt her to speak.

The novel starts by telling the yearly trip taken to the coulee by Naomi and her Uncle. As time passes by and the seasons change, Naomi and Uncle Isamu always return to the coulee for a certain ceremony that Naomi doesn’t understand in the beginning: “We come here once every year around this time, Uncle and I. This spot is half a mile from the Barkers’ farm and seven miles from the village of Granton, where we finally moved in 1951” (Kogawa 1). Since they were sent to camps and moved to different places, Naomi in a way never felt the sense of home in the places she lived. Thus, Naomi finds no reason for optimism. Moreover, Naomi doesn’t know why they go to the coulee every year at this time. Naomi thought that perhaps Uncle just liked the scenery and needed some company with him at the site. For Naomi going to the coulee symbolized merely a trip into nature. As they walked to reach the
coulee they would talk. ‘‘Nothing changes ne,’ I say as we walk toward the rise” (Kogawa 1). Naomi tells her uncle how everything has remained the same after so many years. Actually, everything has changed since the war and internment but the adults have kept past secrets to themselves. Naomi and her older brother, Stephen, were brought up by Uncle Isamu and Obasan like children of their own, thus, they didn’t have the heart to tell them of the tragic death of their beloved mother. In fact, the war has separated and divided their family into parts. For Naomi, in the beginning of the novel, nothing does change but as she reaches the end she gradually transforms into a real woman.

Another reason why they go to the coulee every year can be understood by the fact that Uncle needed to get close to the water. Getting onto the coulee top gave Uncle the sense of being once again near the sea, “Below us the muddy river sludges along its crooked bed. He squats and I stand in the starlight, chewing on bits of grass. This is the closest Uncle ever gets to the ocean” (Kogawa 2). Uncle had always loved the sea but was forced to leave the ocean during the internment of the Japanese people during the war. In fact, Uncle at the time before the war was making and designing his own boat. Working on his boat, Uncle gained a great feeling of accomplishment. However, the government took away Uncle’s privileges and stuffed him in a camp.

Naomi loved visiting the coulee with uncle because the land in a way gave her a strong sense of comfort. The land’s presence has anchored Naomi’s spiritual triumph. Traveling to the coulee was like becoming a part of nature and would alleviate her pain in a certain unknown way. The land meant everything to her. Naomi finds love from the environment in front of her, which reveals how she connects to the land. The land brings her comfort, “Everything in front of us is virgin land. From the beginning of time, the grass along this stretch of prairie has not been cut” (Kogawa 2). Naomi associates her love for this nation with the land she lives upon. The soil and dirt contains memories of her childhood to go with her love. Not only does Naomi find peace with nature, moreover, she becomes a part of the soil in Canada, declaring her love and devotion to this land: “My fingers tunnel through a tangle
of roots till the grass stands up from my knuckles, making it seem that my fingers are the roots. I am part of this small forest. Like the grass, I search the earth and sky with a thin but persistent thirst” (Kogawa 4). After years of suffering in silence, Naomi thirsts to recover what has been lost for years of destruction have to be restored. Becoming a part of nature like a small tree or flower, Naomi understands and cherishes everything she sees. The clouds and sky speak of her dreams. In this regard, Naomi feels completely at home in her heart while she and Uncle are at the coulee. Though Naomi may not sense Uncle’s pain each time they visit the coulee, Naomi gradually will understand the reason for it and find the strength to forgive. As they reach the top of the coulee, Naomi asks, “Isn’t it dangerous?” (Kogawa 3). What worries Uncle isn’t the danger of falling but the overwhelming pain that Naomi and Stephen would experience if they knew about the terrible death of their mother. The worst has passed and now they need to look into the future.

No doubt, a powerful testimony of silent suffering can be seen in Obasan. In the eyes of the old Japanese adults Naomi and Stephen would always be too young to know the truth. The adults succeed all too well in keeping the secret that is at the root of Naomi’s suffering for over thirty years. Unwilling to damage the young hearts of the children, the adults would only whisper while they were around. Still, Naomi hears nothing about her mother or maternal grandmother. The adults have been struggling—consciously and unconsciously, with the conflict over whether to speak or not to speak. Clearly, silence speaks, and more often louder than words: “Mo ikustu? What is your age now?” ‘Eighteen,’ I said. He shook his head as he scuffed the ground. He sighed so deeply that when he exhaled, his breath was a groan . . . ‘Too young,’ he said softly. ‘Still too young’” (Kogawa 3). Though Naomi has become eighteen and able to judge for herself in many aspects, the forbidden secret must be hidden from them for their own sake. To Uncle Isamu, Naomi is still too young at the age of eighteen and still too young at thirty-six to be told about the death of her mother. Uncle has been trying to protect Naomi by keeping the ravaging family secret from her. However, it is not until Uncle Isamu’s death that Naomi
returns home and by flashbacks unriddles the secret. Naomi cannot fully understand Uncle’s expression of love through silence though Naomi is highly attentive to the non-verbal lexicons of touch.

A contrast to Naomi’s devotion to Obasan and her love for her Japanese heritage is Stephen’s rejection of everything related to them. The limp that Stephen develops is a physical sign of his social handicap as a Japanese boy. One distinctive feature about Stephen is that, “Stephen has been developing a slight limp. Dad’s not sure what’s wrong with the leg. He suspects that the fall he had last year never healed properly and there’s some new aggravation at the hip” (Kogawa 106). Stephen’s limp denotes that he has become psychically lame: “The limp that Stephen develops just before the internment (a period when he begins to remove himself gradually from his relatives’ Japanese ways) seems to be a physical sign of the social handicap he feels as a Nikkei” (Cheung 142). His disability shows how different he is from his familial and communal. Stephen’s limp makes him awkward. Members of the family are concerned about and fear of this unknown sickness especially father, “He’s very worry about Stephen—the limp is nor improving” (Kogawa 113). Especially grandpa conveys a strong feeling of anxiety. The adults thought that the limp would disappear but the leg shows no improvement. Dad is worried: “Stephen’s leg was put in cast. Dad thinks that the rest will heal it” (Kogawa 121). No one knows why Stephen’s leg started to develop a limp, but they hope to cure him. Knowing that Stephen’s leg will be alright and healthy again, Dad lets his leg recover by itself. Happily, Stephen gets over this limp, “Stephen’s limp has almost disappeared by late spring. When he runs he sometimes looks like a galloping horse” (Kogawa 164). Gaining his leg’s ability back, Stephen runs off to play with the other children. Like the rest of the kids on the block, Stephen enjoys fooling around with them. With the love and care of his family, Stephen even forgets about the limp.

Another, different characteristic of Stephen is that he denies and dislikes every Japanese element. Stephen, a child at the time of the war, sustains permanent damage as he turns his back on his Japanese roots and background completely. Stephen distances himself from Obasan and
his Japanese heritage. Ironically, Stephen adopts the prejudicial views of the oppressors. In one scene, “Stephen is scowling as Obasan returns and offers him a rice ball. ‘Not that kind of food,’ he says” (Kogawa 136). Stephen truly disfavors the Japanese food made by Obasan. To reject all parts of Japanese culture, Stephen has alienated himself from his Japanese family and their values. Cheung convincingly argues that: “Stephen, a child at the time of the war, sustains permanent, if invisible, damage: he turns his back on Japanese culture completely” (140). In addition, Stephen undergoes a silencing as white boys attack him by breaking his violin. In total contrast to Naomi, who keeps most of her Japanese ways and manners, Stephen eliminates all Japanese connections from his life: “My lunch that Obasan made is two moist and sticky balls with a salty red plum in the center of each, a boiled egg to the side with a tight square of lightly boiled greens. Stephen has peanut-butter sandwiches, an apple, and a thermos of soup” (Kogawa 182). The food that they eat symbolically reveals that Naomi and Stephen live in two separated world. Stephen’s powerlessness leads him to the rejection of things Japanese. The fact that they have become the enemy leads Stephen to deny nearly everything related to his Japanese heritage.

The secrets were kept by the adults as well as Naomi’s mother for the sake of the children. But before learning of the hidden secrets, Naomi saw herself as wounded and rootless. Likewise, the adults knew deep down in their heart that they would “someday” have to reveal the tragic news of the bombing in Japan to Naomi and Stephen. Uncle did have the urge to speak of the secret but he never found a perfect time to speak of it. “Whatever he was intending to tell me ‘someday’ has not yet been told. I sometimes wonder if he realizes my age at all. At thirty-six, I’m hardly a child” (Kogawa 4). In fact, Uncle would always consider Naomi too young to be told the truth. That “someday” would never come for he didn’t have the heart to break the news to her. As Uncle would always say “someday” he didn’t recognize that it would be too late for him to speak. Perhaps Uncle kept this secret until his death because he couldn’t face doing any harm to Naomi. Actually, Uncle’s
intention was kind and he had to hold the pain in himself, which was almost more than he could bear yet.

Uncle’s silence, in particular, was a source of torment for Naomi. The uncle/niece relationship is constituted in this silence. This silence has been an oppressive presence for Naomi from the beginning of the novel. It seems that the future had many unknowns waiting for them. The idea of “someday” not only refers to telling the children the horrible secret but also of how Uncle desires to be on his boat again on that someday in the future. Not knowing what would happen in the future Uncle still hope to find comfort in the unknown future, “Someday, someday again. He was waiting for that someday when he could go back to the boats, but he never did” (Kogawa 26). Truly, Uncle never gave up his wish and wished that “someday” he would be able to sail his boat again. Memories of the past were silent and hid many mysteries that had to be figured out: “The memories were drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence. Everywhere I could hear the adults whispering, ‘Kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children . . . ’ Calmness was maintained” (Kogawa 26). Bewildered, she at first can only hear the silence of the adults. In losing information about her mother and her loving care, Naomi has lost the ability to voice her agony and deprivation. The silences of the adults have affected her negatively instead of saving Naomi from the suffering of a missing mother. No one dared to speak and their main concern is focused on the children.

Not knowing why they come to the coulee every year, Naomi would ask but there would never be a reply from Uncle. “‘Uncle,’ I whisper, ‘why do we come here every year?’ He does not respond. From both Obasan and Uncle I have learned that speech often hides like an animal in a storm” (Kogawa 4). For Naomi reality is measured by silence. Throughout the novel, a strong sense of ambivalence, of wishing to speak and remain silent at the same time, is generated from the narration of Uncle and Obasan. Naomi knows that within this silence is contained a dangerous storm heading toward her and that someday she will be severely struck by it. Many times Uncle tried to tell them but always in vain, “He seems about to say something, his mouth open as he stares straight ahead, his eyes wide. Then, as if to erase his
thoughts, he rubs his hands vigorously over his face and shakes his head” (Kogawa 4). Just as Uncle was about to tell the story for no apparent reason he would once again delete the idea from his head. He would merely get a fixed look on his face with eyes opened wide. Moreover, he would use his hand to rub his face as an act of showing the pain not only in his heart but also the vulnerability body. Besides, he shook his head to remove the thoughts, wishing that these nightmares could be wiped out forever. As they leave the coulee, Naomi would pick at least one flower before going home. The flowers in a sense symbolized taking a part of the coulee back with her. In this sense, not only is the past a part of the present but it also continues to influence the present.

Opposed to Obasan’s passively suffering voice of silence, Aunt Emily is an activist who wants to keep her memories. Indeed, Aunt Emily is a word warrior: “This has been Aunt Emily’s crusade, and Naomi adopts this philosophy in writing this story” (Potter 137). Aunt Emily resembles a crusader, giving Naomi the package which includes the information she needs to find the truth that has been kept from her. Aunt Emily adopts language as her weapon to fight against injustice which represents Julia Kristeva’s definition of rejection “in remodeling the historically accepted signifying device by proposing the representative of a different relation to natural objects, social apparatuses, and the body proper” (126). When they were sent to persecution, Aunt Emily protested vigorously and continues to do so throughout the rest of her life. Though Naomi is old enough to know everything, however, “she (Obasan) stares steadily at the table. The greater my urgency to know, the thicker her silences have always been. No prodding with elicit clues” (Kogawa 55). Though Naomi has a strong impulse to know the past, at this moment Obasan remains to a greater extent in silence.

Though Aunt Emily speaks of her feelings and wants to protect the children for their sake, Obasan has indeed mothered and nurtured the children more. Naomi recalls a conversation in her childhood between Aunt Emily and Obasan: “Aunt Emily wipes her closed eyes with the
back of her hand. She is crying. What can it be? When Obasan finishes there is a long silence. The three sit without moving” (Kogawa 264).

Naomi found it surprising that Aunt Emily had cried because Aunt Emily had never shed a tear in front of her before. Aunt Emily was always fighting the system and demanding their rights as Canadians. What could possibly be the cause of Aunt Emily’s weeping? Nonetheless, after the shedding of tears once again silence fills the room. Not knowing what to say or unable to say something, the adults sit in stillness. Naomi learns from both Aunt Emily and Obasan.

In describing Aunt Emily, Naomi sees her with a political voice who challenges her to adopt a totally different view of the official history. Likewise, Aunt Emily appears to be the positivist occidental inscription to Obasan’s negative silence. Obasan, the quietest person in the novel, also has one of the strongest characters. Actually, Obasan might be portrayed as vulnerable from the outside but inviolably strong inside. She not only unstintingly gave her love to Naomi but also cherished the land she lived upon. Though Obasan is a Nisei she loves and cares about this new homeland as much as her native land: “Everything else is in its place. She is altogether at home here” (Kogawa 18). After many years living in Canada she has found a sense of home here. Canada has become the land where she feels completely at home. She knows that this will be the place where she will eventually die and be buried: “Obasan teaches that you can’t run away from your roots, but neither can you go home again” (Brydon 466). Her dwelling in Canada has become everything to her and “The house is now her blood and bones” (Kogawa 18). Feeling her connection with this house, Obasan has let the soil become a part of her. She, like Uncle, has found that nature can comfort and bring happiness to their life. Nature is a part of Obasan, “Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life’s infinite personal details” (Kogawa 18-19). No doubt, Obasan shares in the bounties of nature, with which she lives in harmony. Obasan can hear the song of a bird, feel the cool waters of a bubbling spring and smell the wet earth after the first rain shower. Nature possesses an
extraordinary power and beauty that brings peace, awe and healing to the heart of Obasan. Hence, she truly believes that nature provides cleansing and nourishment.

At last, it is the narrator and quiet daughter, Naomi, who gives voice to the silence. Finding out the truth of why her mother had never returned Naomi places her mother in her heart and in the land of Canada. Though Naomi’s mother died in Japan and lies there now, Naomi has found a spot to place her here in Canada. Naomi’s mother still continues to live in this ground, “A Canadian maple tree grows there where your names stand. The tree utters its scarlet voice in the air. Prayers bleeding. Its rustling leaves are fingers scratching an empty sky” (Kogawa 290). As a result, the place where they lay to rest Naomi’s mother has grown a maple tree with roots that run firmly deep into the land: “Mixing the ashes of her dead with the Canadian soil allows her to claim Canada as not only her political, but also her spiritual home” (Gottlieb 50). This symbolizes Naomi’s mother and Canada as growing entangled together in her need for both. This apocalyptic vision implies a rootedness in the land: “Her mother still speaks as a Canadian, even from the grave, the red maple leaf signifying her identity, her linguistic reality, even as her body lies buried in Japanese soil” (Goellnicht 301). Naomi’s mother remains a Canadian even in the grave. The red maple leaf signifies her Canadian identity though she is buried in Japan. Having heard about the death of her mother, Naomi must accept this separation from her in the flesh but finds connection in oneness with her mother’s lost soul.

Finally after hearing the stories Naomi recognizes how the child in her dreams actually represents her. The injured child scared of saying anything remains silent, “In my dreams, a small child sits with a wound on her knee. The wound on her knee is on the back of her skull, large and moist. A double wound. The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell” (Kogawa 291). This double wound lies in both her physical body and mental makeup. The young child, frightened to speak or demand anything, finds life a dead end with nowhere to go. Naomi’s inability to speak relates to her mother’s silence, “Gentle mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our
mutual destruction” (Kogawa 291). After Naomi realizes her mother wished not to tell the children of her suffering, Naomi comes to appreciate her silence and becomes clear about her reason for being missing when Naomi needed her the most: “Naomi, finally in possession of the only knowledge that can bring her relief from the haunting questions, can begin the process of psychic healing” (Fairbanks 85). Silence can be a way, however painful, to protect others.

In her mother’s silence Naomi stops blaming herself for past mistakes: “We are abandoned yet we are not abandoned. You are present in every hell. Teach us to Love’s presence in our abandonment. Teach us to forgive” (Kogawa 292). With the recovery of the Young Mother of Nagasaki, Naomi’s voice becomes more affirmative and strong. Qigang Yan argues that “The last voice is certainly optimistic: initial separation ends by bringing the daughter ever closer to the mother” (100). Naomi’s journey has reached an end when she becomes capable of forgiving. To forgive means more than forgetting, “The conversion of a single tree into a forest suggests that she has found a new relationship to the outside world as well as to her mother, while the fact that this forest grows from graves suggests that she has accepted the permanent loss of relatives and community” (Harris 50-51). Finding strength in her heart again, “Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves” (Kogawa 292). In this final stage Naomi lays to rest her lost beloved family, “My loved ones, rest in your world, around you flows the underground stream. How bright in the darkness the brooding light. How gentle the colors of rain” (Kogawa 295). The rain here contrasts with the dark rain from the bombing.

Walking toward the spot she would always visit with her uncle, Naomi feels the open arms of nature. Naomi has found a way to finally understand and interpreter historical experiences:

I inch my way down the steep path that skirts the world rose bushes, down slipping along the wet grass where the underground stream seeps through the earth. My shoes are mud clogged again . . . The reflection is rippling in the river- water and stone dancing. It’s a quiet ballet, soundless as breath. (Kogawa 296)

Near the end of the novel, Naomi celebrates a close personal connection
with earth, her mother, father and uncle. Nature has found a way into Naomi’s heart and claims her. Everything that Naomi looks at reflects the stillness of the wild: “Naomi reaches the end of her wake and her meditative journey back in time. She returns to the coulee, the site of her pilgrimage, and the previously dead landscape comes alive for her in the light of a new knowledge, a new understanding” (Gottlieb 36). At the end, as Naomi stands looking down on the coulee in the early prairie dawn, she has transformed her antipathy into love and forgiveness. There are many reasons to leave but only one to stay and this the most problematic of all. Arriving at the top where she was with Uncle the previous month Naomi denotes:

Up at the top of the slope, I can see the spot where Uncle sat last month looking out over the landscape. “Umi, no yo,” he always said. “It’s like the sea.” Between the river and Uncle’s spot are the wild roses and the tiny wildflowers that 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 sit. (Kogawa 296)

Hence, Naomi’s journey to the coulee may be mapped as a path from being lost to being found. The story begins with Naomi’s search for her absent mother and ends with the reconstruction of a family: “Therefore, the final scene in the novel in which Naomi affirms the location of the symbolic gravesite, the spot Uncle had chosen for the annual ritual to commemorate Mother’s death, offer resolution to her own rootlessness and homelessness” (Gottlieb 50). The richness of this passage adds a final touch to give the book’s power and depth. *Obasan* has woven together many stories: Naomi’s alienated childhood, Aunt Emily’s journal of commitment and protest, the family pictures and secrets of the adults and, most of all, the official documents. Though Naomi is marginalized, now she has her own voice and integrity: “In this redemptive context, the loved ones in their ‘world of stone’ and the moon ‘a pure white stone’ suggest that Naomi has indeed found ‘a new written,’ has discovered that ‘the stone bursts with telling’” (Fujita 37). In this regard, the novel has moved in stages from muteness to a spoken
voice. Naomi has learned to love Canada and still be true to herself. Likewise, Naomi didn’t want to live a life less ordinary. Naomi mixes and matches past and present with confidence to create a space symbolic of her. By the end, Naomi has found a larger, universal vision that broadens her horizon. In all, as Naomi’s mind clears, she can find a voice of her own with a new understanding in life.
Works Cited


