

# ความเงียบ อัตลักษณ์แห่งวัฒนธรรมญี่ปุ่นในนวนิยายเรื่อง Obasan

## Silence: Japanese Cultural Identity in Obasan

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนึกจำกับหน้าของความเงียบในนวนิยายเรื่อง Obasan ของ Joy Kogawa นวนิยายเรื่องนี้ถ่ายทอด ชีวิตของชาวแคนาดาเชื้อสายญี่ปุ่นในช่วงสงครามโลกครั้งที่ 2 เมื่อพวกเขายูกขึ้นไปจากบ้านที่เคยอยู่ไปเข้าค่ายแรงงานเพียงความเป็นชาวญี่ปุ่น ความเงียบเป็นคุณลักษณะสำคัญในชุมชนชาวญี่ปุ่นในแคนาดาซึ่งมันอาจจะส่งผลทั้งในทางบวกและในทางลบ ในทางบวกความเงียบทำให้ตัวละครสามารถลือสารและอดทนต่อความยากลำบาก แต่ในทางลบก็ทำให้พวกเขากลอกเป็นเหยื่อของความโหดร้ายและความทรงจำที่เลวร้าย ตัวเอกของเรื่องได้ทำลายความเงียบและสร้างการสื่อสารต่อตัวละครอื่นขึ้นใหม่ ทำให้สามารถทำลายปมที่อยู่ในใจและยอมรับตัวตนได้ดีขึ้น

**คำสำคัญ:** Obasan ความเงียบ อัตลักษณ์ ชาวแคนาดาเชื้อสายญี่ปุ่น

### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of silence in Joy Kogawa's Obasan. The novel presents the lives of Japanese Canadians during the period of WWII, when they suffered the experience of dislocation and hard labour under the hands of the government, who punished them for being Japanese. Silence plays an important role in the Japanese community. Silence can be viewed in both a positive and negative light. While positive silence helps characters to be able to communicate and endure all hardship, negative silence victimizes them and brings back nightmares. Not until communication is re-established is the protagonist able to reconcile her past with the present, and understand herself and her identity.

**KEYWORDS :** Obasan, silence, identity, Japanese-Canadian

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“There is a silence that cannot speak  
There is a silence that will not speak”  
(preface)

In Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, the whole novel is imbued with the density of silence, which is a prominent characteristic of Japanese cultural identity. Not only does silence mean nonverbal language, which is frequently used between Obasan and Naomi, but here it also connotes a sense of stoicism, which Naomi describes as enduring pain, “The weeds in the garden do not moan when they are plucked from the skin of the earth. Nor do the trees cry out at their fierce combing as they lie uprooted by the roadside.” Throughout the story, many Japanese Canadian characters, who are unjustly maltreated by the Canadian government, remain silent as a way to get through the pains and hardship of life. In Obasan, Joy Kogawa presents ideas about silence in a positive light, but she also points out the fact that silence, while regarded as an admirable ethnic quality, has the potential to victimize the characters at the same time. Before the publication of Obasan, racism in Canada had been underated. Only a few people knew that Japanese Canadian were forced to leave their houses and live in the labour camps. Kowaga is the first writer who tackles the issue of Japanese-Canadian internment which is the dark part of Canada’s history. The popularity of her novel resulted in the survivors receiving compensation from the government. The book won many rewards and has been chosen to be read in high school

and universities throughout Canada.

Obasan has been widely read as a novel dealing with the characters’ silence and vocalizing. However, Grice (1999) focuses nonverbal communication in the text and suggested that the characters are able to communicate through silence. Lefebvre (2010) addresses the issue of Iwamura argues that Kogawa employs biblical citation to add spiritual weight to a struggle for political self-determination, recognition, and freedom. In his study, Lim investigates two Asian-American novel, Monica Sone’s Nisei Daughter and Kogawa’s Obasan in terms of the maternal past, generational difference, and the attempt to assimilate into a mainstream white society. Silence plays important role as the keeper of memories.

Beauregard (2001) discusses the teaching cultural texts that contain historic racial past. It is challenging to address the issue of a “racist past” in the current multicultural society of Canada. A contemporary rethinking of Canadian literary studies cultural politics and its contemporary implication. Similarly, Goellnicht(1989) regards Obasan as a piece of writing that contains both history and fiction. He employs Postmodern and Poststructuralist theories to study female minority writing.

Cook (2007) claims that memory plays important role in helping the protagonist achieve vision of wholeness and integration as it acts as time-redeemer and defeater. Naomi is able to liberate herself from the grip of time through her memories of the past and

her love ones. Lefebvre (2010) underlines the importance of repetition and revision. He argues that telling the trauma narratively repeatedly might allow it to evolve and change. Traumatic memory can be transformed into a coherent traumatic narrative, which allows one to be confronted and reconfronted with the past. Rao (2004) explores relationship between identity formation and place. Both identity and place are formed by border and borderlands. In Tourino's study (2003), the idea of borderland is again emphasized as the Japanese-Canadian women are found to be childless and celibate. Those who try to assimilate into the white culture are regarded as having masculine behavior and thus not fit for marriage. They obtain the status of border because these Japanese-Canadians are neither fully Japanese nor feminine.

Pragatwutisarn (2011) discusses silence of Japanese people as well. Naomi, the third generation of Japanese Canadian revisited her traumatic past. Confronting the past is a way to heal and liberate herself from the haunting past. Speech and memory. It is important to break silence but at the same time one needs to be silent to listen and understand other people.

Kogawa views silence as a powerful means of communication. Through nonverbal language, it enables the characters to reach out to one another more effectively. As Grice notes, silence is "a 'telepathic world' where tactility, nuance, tonality, as well as spatial and olfactory awareness provide the indices

of communication and information." We can see that Naomi is able to communicate and understand other characters more deeply without any language barriers. Silence here does not alienate people. In contrast, it creates more opportunities for Naomi to understand herself and the persons she loves.

At the beginning of the story, Naomi cannot understand the message that her uncle tries to tell her through speech, but later, only through nonverbal language, she can understand and communicate to her uncle even in his absence. Naomi tries to interpret the meaning of her uncle's words, "Umi no yo... it's like the sea." She fails at first because she catches only the meaning of the words. As for Uncle, he seems to have more appreciation for the depth of nonverbal communication. As Naomi observes, "From both Obasan and Uncle I have learned that speech often hides like an animal in a storm." This means that they rarely use verbal language to communicate with her, so language seems ambiguous and threatening between them. It cannot generate reality and understanding as clearly as sense perception does, which Naomi lacks at this time in the novel. Later, when Naomi has an epiphany spurred by the knowledge about her mother, she can hear the "wordless word" and see what her uncle means. Standing at the same spot where her uncle used to stand, looking at the same landscape where he said those words, Naomi senses the meaning that her uncle tried to tell her once. Despite the experience of being uprooted, he teaches her to identify herself with the land that is their

home now. The communication in silence thus enables Naomi to understand herself, her life, and her identity.

Among her surviving relatives, Naomi develops the closest relationship with Obasan, a silent character, who communicates with her through silent expression (Grice, 1999). For Naomi, silence draws people closer to her than speech does. For example, Aunt Emily and her brother, Stephen, despite their speech, are always distant towards her. Naomi cannot understand their speech the way she understands Obasan's silence. Between Naomi and Obasan, words are useless. After Uncle's death, Naomi can sense Obasan's sadness although she does not express it, "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." She sympathizes with Obasan whose feelings are hidden inside. Except for Naomi, no one can understand the depth of Obasan's silence. "Everyone someday dies.... Everything is forgetfulness" are the sentences that Obasan repeats again and again after the death of Uncle. As Naomi observes: "By repeating this so often, I suppose she is trying to make realizable what is real." We can see her ability to interpret Obasan's expressions, which means that she is the only person who cares about and understands Obasan's loss.

Naomi's relationship with her father is expressed without words. The moment they are reunited, there are many indescribable feelings of joy, warmth, yearning, and

fulfillment, which can be understood through physical contact only.

We do not talk. His hands cup my face. I wrap my arm around his neck. The button of his pajama top presses in my cheek. I can feel his heart's steady thump thump thump.... The laughter in my arms is quiet as the moon, quiet as snow falling, quiet as the white light from the stars.... I am in my father's arms again my father's arms.

Within silence, both Naomi and her father can appreciate each other's presence. Word expression cannot carry their feelings as powerfully as sense perception does. Here, although the story is a flashback to Naomi's childhood, moments of speechlessness are still fresh in her memory.

Also, for Naomi, her only connection to her dead mother is through silence or what she calls the "amniotic deep." As a child, Naomi suffers from the absence of her mother without any information. The idea that her mother has deserted her and does not love her anymore causes her great pain. However, as she can understand her mother's silent love, the language of silence reduces her pain and brings about her reunion with her parents where corporeal form is unneeded:

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.... But the

earth still stirs with dormant blooms.  
Love flows through the roots of the  
trees by our graves.

Here silence does not make her feel lonely. It is the bridge that connects her to them. She can communicate with them because this silence is full of love and understanding.

Not only is silence portrayed as a medium that links people together, but silence is also one Japanese identity that helps Japanese people cope with problems. In the story, as they undergo many difficulties, we can see that Japanese Canadians often use silence as a way to reconcile many conflicts.

First, during the time of suffering in internment camps under the policy of dislocation and dispersal, silence gave the Japanese Canadians the strength and patience to encounter hardships and injustice that harmed them physically and mentally. At the time, there was no way to better their situation, so they survived these difficulties with their courageous silence. They were not defeated because they did not give up but instead fought their inner weakness. In the novel, the experience at the sugar beet farm is a very clear example. The newspaper says that they are “Grinning and Happy,” while, in fact, their situation is almost unbearable, as Naomi describes it, “There is a word for it. Hardship. The hardship is so pervasive, so inescapable, so thorough it’s a noose around my chest and I cannot move anymore.” Despite this hopeless situation, we can see

that Kogawa in some way presents the Japanese fighting spirit within silence, which accentuates this national characteristic. Japanese Canadians see that there is no use of complaining, “gaman shi masho—let us endure.” Instead of blaming the government, Japanese Canadians still keep an optimistic view on the situation, “This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude.” Therefore, those who suffer make up their mind to forgive and to accept the injustice of their lives calmly.

Furthermore, silence here seems to be the safe means by which Obasan copes with problems. Her silence is portrayed as containing a tough quality and is compared to “stone,” or “her territory,” which separates her from harm. Obasan is indifferent to other people’s threats. For example, once a man in a restaurant tries to give Naomi money, Obasan avoids the unpleasant situation by remaining calm, as Naomi observes, “I poke Obasan’s arm and she shakes her head so slightly it is almost as if there is no movement. Her lips have barely changed but there is a tightness to them. She has the same wary expression as we leave the restaurant.” Here Obasan thinks that if she does not pay attention to those men, they can do her no harm. Her inner retreat prevents her from getting involved in any problems.

Many times, Naomi suggests that Obasan’s silence is as still as “stone.” However, we can see that although her silence contains harsh qualities in order to help her survive a hard life, Obasan’s silence

still serves as a support for other people. Her silence in Naomi's eyes is strong but tender. First, as a surrogate mother for the children, Obasan raises them with care but does not show her love through words. Obasan appears to readers as a stoic and self-sacrificing character whose actions prove her love and care for the children. As the statement, "Action speaks louder than words," claims, we can see the contrast between Obasan's silence and Aunt Emily's words. Obasan, who suffers from the hardship of raising two children and from the hard work at the sugar beet farm, never complains, while Aunt Emily, who does not directly experience the same hardships, struggles fiercely and calls for justice. Naomi thus lives in the world of reality where only the silent strategy of Obasan brings her up and helps her get through it. Aunt Emily's words mean nothing to her as she declares:

All of 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. They do not touch us where we are planted here in Alberta, our roots clawing the sudden prairie air. The words are not made flesh.

Here only silence can "make flesh," or nurture Naomi as a child to grow up. Words that call for justice do nothing for her.

Therefore, we can see that Obasan's silence provides both protection and nurture for the children.

Although sometimes silence is presented as suffocating to Naomi and Stephen, it is the protective silence that shields them from pain. The fate of their mother who is disfigured by the bomb in Japan is too horrific for the adults to let them know. As the adults say "Kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children," no one ever mentions the absence of their mother. This silence seems to haunt them and make them doubt their mother's love. However, as the story is revealed when they are mature, they can understand their mother and the reason why she does not contact them. This silence, they realize, is the expression of self-sacrifice and love. That is, the mother wants to bear the pain herself alone. Thus, through this silence, the children can be safe from this painful fact.

As noted above, silence is a facet of Japanese cultural identity that plays an important role in this story. However, not only does silence connect people through nonverbal language and become a strategy for Japanese Canadians to cope with their difficult life during the Second World War, but it also has negative effects. Here, Kogawa presents another side of silence that in some ways victimizes people also.

Even though Obasan is depicted as a strong and quiet character, she is still hurt by the world of silence that separates her from other people: "Her land is impenetrable, so thick that even the sound of mourning is

swallowed up. In her steadfast silence, she remains inviolate.” The death of her husband is also caused by lack of communication, as she repeats, “There was no knowing.” “She couldn’t hear what he had to say.... She did not understand what was happening. The nurses at the hospital also did not understand.” This situation reflects that nonverbal language cannot communicate effectively at certain times and with certain people who do not understand the silent language. Except for Uncle and Naomi, Obasan seems unable to communicate with anyone else. However, sometimes even Naomi cannot understand her, as evidenced by her statement that, “I did not have, I have never had, the key to the vault of her thoughts.” The silent language of Obasan never touches Stephen in particular, as Kogawa writes, “Stephen, unable to bear the density of her inner retreat and the rebuke he felt in her silences, fled to the ends of the earth.” Obasan’s silence makes her unintelligible to Stephen who is always “uncomfortable when anything is ‘too Japanese.’” Thus, his relationship with her seems “irritable,” and he, “is almost completely noncommunicative with Obasan.” Here, Obasan is totally neglected by a person who cannot reach her world.

Naomi is the clear evidence of how silence can make someone a victim. Although she agrees with Obasan that silence is the safest way to solve any problems, in her situation, her silence is different from the strong silence of Obasan. Unlike Obasan, Naomi’s silence is passive. In her case, since she is a quiet

child, the Old Man Gower exploits her trust and sexually abuses her because she has no strength to protect herself. Still young and believing that silence will save her, Naomi does not resist the Old Man, as is evidenced in her statement that, “If I am still, I will be safe.” Looking back at the event, Naomi still asks herself, “Is this where the terror begins?” Her silence here is caused by fear and shame. She does not cry for help when her brother comes and interrupts the Old Man. She thinks, “I am ashamed. If Stephen comes he will see my shame.” This feeling makes her unable to liberate herself from this nightmare. Even as an adult, she is still haunted by it. She asks, “Does Old Man Gower still walkthrough the hedges between our houses in Vancouver, in Slocan, in Granton and Cecil?”

The experience of sexual molestation does not only shame her, but it also torments her with guilt in that Naomi thinks that it is the main cause of her mother’s disappearance. She believes that by keeping this secret to herself, she is spiritually separated from her mother. She states, “We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half.” Burdened with guilt and loss, Naomi is unable to cure this wound that finally becomes trauma. As an adult, she still keeps this scar hidden under the surface. Although she cannot liberate herself from this painful memory, Naomi realizes that silence does not mean that there is no problem, as she says that, “From my years of teaching I know it’s the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain.”

Silence without explanation causes problems in Naomi's psychological development too. As she perceives that there are some secrets held back from her, she feels anxious and lost. She says, "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." Naomi's endless questions about her mother's absence both bring about hope and despair at the same time. As she hopes that her mother is still alive, she cannot help thinking that her mother has deserted her, or if she believes that her mother is dead, there is no proof or any assurance, and she feels that, "This is the way it is whenever I ask questions. The answers are not answers at all." This feeling bothers her and destroys her confidence in herself and her mother's love. She is always confused. She thinks, "Did I doubt her love? Am I her accuser?" Although silence here means to do her good, it somehow mentally harms her. Not until she is thirty-six years of age does this secret reveal Nakayama-sensei's surprise:

"Has there been no telling?"

"No," Aunt Emily says quietly.

"It is better to speak, is it not?"

They are not children any longer

Aunt Emily nods slowly. "Yes," she says softly. "We ought to tell them.

I always thought we should. But...

kodomo no tame...".

Like those unpleasant experience, the knowledge of her mother's being is needed because it is important to help her form self-identity. Here, without words, there is no understanding as seen in Naomi' interior monologue: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction."

Although silence is people's willpower to endure hardship and pain, without release, it causes great repression. In Obasan, we can see the examples of the return of repression from Naomi and Grandma Kato, whose attempt to forget the trauma tortures their existence. First, Naomi tries to overlook her indelible past in vain. This can be seen in her negative attitude towards Aunt Emily who always reminds her of those memories. During her childhood, all experiences after the exile from her house in Vancouver is so miserable, but she cannot reconcile to the past by forgetting it. The following passage shows Naomi's fear of the past:

And I am tired, I suppose, because I want to get away from all this. From the past and all these papers, from the present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words.

Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep".

Naomi cannot live without the past, although she tries to. By rejecting it, Naomi rejects her own self, as Aunt Emily tells her:

"You have to remember," Aunt Emily said. "You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene".

In the same way, Grandma Kato also suffers the same fate from her silence. Her attempt to keep her pain to herself causes repression, which haunts her so much that she can no longer stand it. She tries to repress the pain by forgetting it, such that, "however much the effort to forget, here is no forgetfulness." Finally, she has to write about and share the horrible experience with her husband, hoping it will help her relieve her pain:

She and my mother, she writes, were unable to talk of all the things that happened. The horror would surely die sooner, they felt, if they refused to speak. But the silence and the constancy of the nightmare had become unbearable for Grandma and she hoped that by sharing them with her husband, she could be helped to extricate herself from the grip of the past.

Breaking silence thus becomes the healthy way to heal pain. Both Naomi and Grandma Kato prove this themselves. Amnesia is not the proper way to heal the wound. As the past cannot be deleted, the repression

certainly will return in the form of agonizing nightmares that ruin their lives.

To sum it up, silence, as a dominant characteristic of Japanese people, influences the tone of the novel in that it has two functions. While it ties a group of people together, it also separates them from another. People in the novel are divided into two groups, one of silence, the other of speech. Silence also helps and harms the characters at the same time. It provides them with power but also victimizes them. Silent people can be either weak or strong, such as Naomi on one hand and Obasan on the other. Consequently, Kogawa does not directly give us a judgment on whether silence is actually good or bad. The keyword here is communication. Whether through silence or speech, we need to reach and understand other people. So, the solution is to find the middle ground where silence and speech meet and to generate effective meaning and understanding as Naomi does. When Naomi realizes her mother's love, she can hear the voice from the past and the present:

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.

I close my eyes.

Mother, I am listening. Assist me to hear you.

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