

Cultural Identity and Female Immigrants: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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Recebido 13, set. 2010 / Aprovado 10, jan. 2011

Resumo: A construção problemática da identidade de imigrantes femininos, a sua tentativa de integrar-se no novo ambiente criado pela Política da Imigração Canadense do “internment” japonês durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial e o seu protesto contra esta situação humilhante são o foco do presente trabalho. A obra *Obasan* de Joy Kogawa apresenta uma situação na qual os imigrantes são postos em uma situação que cria conflito. O enfrentamento direto entre os imigrantes canadenses e os canadenses nativos em uma colocação desigual, desequilibrada, uma situação política específica, lembra a relação de “victim/victimizer” discutida por Homi Bhabha e o que ele chama “a ambivalência na relação” no contexto do discurso pós-colonial. O potencial de resistência e subversão, nesta tensão, que emerge, é de particular relevância para este trabalho. O trabalho destaca a diferença entre os Issei – residentes canadenses nascidos ou criados no Japão – e os Nissei – as pessoas do origem japonesa nascidas e criadas no Canadá para mostrar como isto os leva a adotar medidas diferentes. O argumento é construído em torno do papel da cultura que explica como eles reagem a esta situação específica, o protesto silencioso de uma tia e a resistência aberta e direta à opressão ou injustiça assumida por outra tia. Concluímos que as duas obasans ou tias, na obra de Kogawa, apresentam duas formas da resistência feminina à internação no Canadá que são arraigadas nas culturas nas quais elas foram criadas.

Palavras chave: identidade; cultura; imigrantes femininos; “internment” japonês; Segunda Guerra Mundial.

One of the main themes of Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* (1981) is constructed around the ambivalence of identity formation, constructed or imposed; Japanese immigrants/ Japanese Canadians and the Canadian citizens. Kogawa's text focuses, on the one hand, on the Canadian landscape and, on the other hand, it shows how the Japanese Canadian's forced evacuation from their homes and their

properties affected the identity formation of these people. Raising the questions of immigrants, citizenship and national identity the novel knits around three main female characters; Obasan,¹ Aunt Emily and Naomi. Focusing on these three female characters this paper discusses the problematic identity formation of female immigrants/ citizens, their attempt to integrate into the new life situation created by the Canadian Immigration Policies for the intern Japanese during the World War II and their protest against this humiliating situation.

As critics (Fujita, Cheung, Amoko) have observed Kogawa's novel is a document of silence located within the multicultural narrative tradition. However, as Coral Howells (1992) has pointed out, it would be more appropriate to define the predicament of the immigrant in Canada as "transcultural" rather than multicultural since this condition implies a constant sliding between native culture and adopted culture. Such a situation gives right of entry in two worlds which at times can be interpreted as a "great privilege". (HUTCHEON; RICHMOND, 1990, p. 99).

Kogawa's *Obasan*, looking from a different angle, presents the difficult situation in which the immigrants are posed.² The Pearl Harbor episode suddenly changed their reception in a society they had lived for a long time or in case of Japanese Canadians, who, where they were born, are seen as enemies. The paradoxical situation is explicit in one of the Kogawa's character, Stephen's, riddle: "We are both the enemy and not the enemy". (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 70). This new identity not only snatches away everything they had constructed as immigrants or citizens of that country but also places them in an ambivalent situation where they themselves questions: who are they? Were they Japanese immigrants? Or Were they Canadian citizens? The direct encounter between the immigrant Canadians and the native Canadians in an unequal, unbalanced setting, a specific political situation, leads to a victim/victimizer relationship discussed by Homi Bhabha and poses them in what he calls the "ambivalence in the relationship" in the context of post-colonial discourse.³ The potential for resistance and subversion, in this imbalanced tension which emerges, is of particular relevance for present study, since the paper highlights the difference between the Issei--Canadian residents born or raised in Japan--and the Nisei--people of Japanese extraction born and raised in Canada which leads them to adopt to different measures. Immigrants in Canadian Literature, similar to immigrants in any country, are also faced with feelings of isolation from society and the land. Obasan (Naomi's aunt) and uncle Sam are

the example of how immigrants are socially isolated from society in the novel.

The history of Japanese immigration in Canada starts as early as 1870.⁴ Until the United States were attacked by the Japanese military force, for almost a century, they lived as “immigrants”, and, being immigrants, they remained invisible to public eye. It is curious how something like Pearl Harbor or 11 September affects people’s lives more specifically those of the immigrants/ citizens. Those tragic events snatch away not only their citizenship rights, but also tears off their “invisibility” or “unmarked identity”, and places them in a position where they are suddenly transformed into a “devil” or most “dangerous criminals” who are to be confined into Internment Camps or imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Their citizenship rights are stripped off immediately and, as if it is not enough, they are made to be ashamed of something they did not commit.

This must have been the reason why, for a long time, the Canadian Japanese people, victims of internment, and their offspring kept silence about this dark episode of their life. Although Asian Americans, including those of Japanese heritage, have lived in the north American hemisphere for more than 150 years, too little about their experiences, their history, the country of their heritage, and their literature is reflected in the American or Canadian writing, be it history books or literature. Only recently a number of works on the topic started to appear. The young Canadian Japanese, not so much compelled by their ancestor’s cultural identity, decide to break this silence. Their decision to give voice to this bitter experience can be seen in a significant production of literary works on the topic. For the last thirty years or so a great number of literary works have focused their attention on the Canadian/ American Japanese and the World War II and the experience of internment of Japanese Americans or Japanese Canadians has suddenly become the center of attraction of the young Canadian and American Japanese writers. The Japanese people in Brazil also went through this humiliating experience, but the depiction of Japanese Brazilian experience is still waiting to come out.⁵

Many of these works, written mostly by the Japanese American or Canadian writers such as *The Dream of Water* by Kyoko Mori, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Warrior Woman* (1976), the autobiographical novel *The Ink-Keeper’s Apprentice* by Allen Say, published in 1979. Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), David Hwang’s *Madame Butterfly* (1989), Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* (1989), Salisbury, Graham’s *Under the Blood-Red Sun* (1994), and Frank Chin’s epic *Gunga Din Highway*

(1994) have helped establish a creditable Asian American presence in the world of contemporary letters. These works are more like historical fiction in which the main characters are young Japanese Canadians or Americans born in Canada or United States. As a citizen of these countries, their tone is of reconciliation, of minimizing the cultural differences between their new country and their ancestor's country, as they live with expectations of their Japanese parents and grandparents and learn about the country of their heritage as one who has not lived there. Embedded in Say's work, as in those of Mori, are cultural contrasts conveyed by authors who lived in Japan until they came to the United States as teens. In Kogawa one gets the pre and post World War Japanese experience it is the feeling of the next generation, who is strongly tied with its American or Canadian identity and denies accepting this discrimination.

Most of these novels written by first generation American-born or Canadian-born Japanese (Nisei) focus on the shock of Pearl Harbor, the internment years, and the anti-Japanese feelings that continued after the war. The narrator is often a child who gives details of the forced evacuation of Japanese who were allowed to take only what they could carry; prized possessions lost or sold for a pittance. The sense of loss is quite strong in these narratives, but nowhere one observes any grudge against the Canadians or Americans. In *Obasan*, Kogawa presents not only the loss but the pain one feels at such occasions. Her protagonist is "tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum, unable to shout, or sin or dance, unable to scream or swear unable to laugh, unable to breathe out loud." (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 183).

From the beginning Kogawa's novel received a warm welcome both from the readers and the critics. The aspect that called immediate attention was the poetic style of the novel, the depiction of silence and the presentation of the natural beauty of the Canadian landscape. With a few notable exceptions, Kogawa's depiction of Japanese subjects has received very little attention.⁶ It seems critics tend to ignore the political implications of Kogawa's work, effectively eliding "culture" and "race" as elements of her novel.

The novel is based on the autobiographical facts of Kogawa's own life. The events partially take place in Marpole (Vancouver), at a house on 64th Avenue where Kogawa herself had lived as a child and depicts the expulsion of the Japanese, born in Japan and born in Canada, from the British Columbian coast to the

detention camp at Slocan, a ghost town in British Columbia and eventually to the Alberta prairies during World War II. The narrative enacts a process of remembering the past in order to deal with a child's memories of loss as she is forced to separate from her parents and also from her home in Vancouver.

The expulsion into the Canadian wilderness represents the erasure of an entire ethnic identity that gets voice in terms of her personal experience of what she perceives as a journey into the darkness: "We are going down the middle of the earth with pick-axe eyes, tunneling by train into the Interior, carried along by the momentum of the expulsion into the waiting wilderness". (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 132).

The suffering of family and long hours on trains, crowded, filthy assembly centers; horse stalls as homes; the desert with sand storms and extremes of temperature; rushing to the wash room and the dining hall; the break-up of families who no longer sat around a table to eat together; worry about fathers who were imprisoned in other states are touching episodes the novel presents. Despite of these hardships the effort to preserve the Japanese culture is marked as in between the desert like landscape Kogawa presents the little Bonsai gardens in the sand.

The family, always being the center of life for Japanese, even after they migrated to other countries such as the United States, Canada, or Brazil, continues to be of main concern and plays a major role in the construction / imposition of identity. Traditionally, in Japanese families both parents take part in bringing up the children and in educating them. "My parents like two needles, knit the families carefully in one blanket [...] We were the original "togetherness" people" (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 24) says Kogawa's protagonist Naomi. The education starts at home in form of preserving culture and at school which has always been the priority of these immigrants and from the very beginning in all these countries the special schools were founded where the Nisei (second generation) learned Japanese customs and language. However, by growing up in a culture; Canadian, American or Brazilian, the young Nisei feel caught between two different cultures; the pride of both the young and their parents and also the restraint, particularly of the parents; the continued loyalty to the new country and remarkable acceptance of situations such as the internment leads one to go further, dig the literature and analyze the problematic of identity construction of these immigrants. It is interesting to observe that the historical basis of the distinctive features of Japanese society that occur

in these works of literature is a mixture of two religious or philosophical ideals. On the one hand, we get the Confucian ideals that have been a part of Japanese society from the seventh century in form of respect for authority, devotion to duty, and family loyalty and, on the other hand, we get the influence of Shinto, the indigenous Japanese religion as we see the appreciation for nature and the preference for simplicity as the main features of Japanese society.

The story in *Obasan* brings in two aspects and two perspectives of life; one lived by the Issei and the other lived by the Nisei. For Na-cmi Nakane, often called as Naomi, it is incomprehensible as an adult, looking back on this experience, how she and her people could have been exiled in her own native country. Kogawa's narrative blurs the recognized order of identities as it moves from the past to the present and the flashbacks of the child narrator Na-cmi Nakane. Overlapping the trauma of immigrants with the alienation of II World War, it refigures the immigrants, within an international flow of Asians discriminating between the cultures of the origin. As Rao observes: "It is also a novel that denounces and protests the treatment accorded to Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, when they were moved to camps and had their lands confiscated". (2004).

The novel presents two aunts, the older one whom Naomi calls "Obasan" or "Aya Obasan" and the younger one whom she calls "Aunt Emily." "Obasan" is an Issei; "Aunt Emily," a Nisei. The contrast between two aunts is strikingly in the difference between the Issei--Canadian residents, born or raised in Japan--, and the Nisei--people of Japanese origin born and raised in Canada. Obasan is Issei or the first-generation of Japanese whereas Aunt Emily is Nisei or the second-generation born of Japanese parents in Canada; Naomi is third-generation Japanese Canadian called Sansei.

As Willis (1987) aptly says "the Japanese word for "aunt" is "obasan," each of the two may be termed an "obasan" of Naomi's" but the writer chooses to give them distinct identity and the distinction between her two aunts is drawn in a number of ways. First, it is the selection of words to address the two aunts. One, with Japanese origin, an Issei, is never addressed in English manner with the word "aunt" but is always referred to as obasan. Whereas the Canadian born or Nisei, is always addressed as "Aunt Emily". It seems that Kogawa purposely creates this distance between the two women to mark the difference between the Japanese and Canadian identities. In the beginning of the novel itself the narrator shows

the difference between the two as Naomi says: "How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone". (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 39). As critics have observed the word "stone" refers to the silence which is a typical characteristic of Japanese people and this identity trait is used more powerfully by obasan. Apart from this, these two women present two different personalities.

Kogawa draws a line between young obasan presented in the family photograph and the old woman living in her silence. She had "slanted eyes" full of tenderness but a sad smile. A determined woman "no urging [...] will persuade her of anything. She will do what she will do. (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 20). "She was [...] the only daughter of a widowed schoolteacher and was brought up in private schools. When she came to Canada, she worked as a music teacher. (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 22).

Aunt Emily in photo was "a pudgy teenager [...] round face and the stocky build [...] Not a beauty but, one might say, solid and intelligent looking" (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 23) who has changed to "a crusader, a little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes." She is a woman with five foot and one inch height, "but much chunkier and with "daikon ashi" [...], legs as shapely as Japanese radishes. A small tank of a woman with a Winston Churchill stoops." (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 39)

Naomi compares the two women, "Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior." (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 32). Early in the novel when Naomi is first browsing through Aunt Emily's parcel, she observes that every time the words "Japanese race" appeared in the new articles or in pamphlets, Aunt Emily has crossed them out and written "Canadian citizens." Therein lies the identity problem. Naomi's family was viewed as visitors and then, with the outbreak of war, as the enemy but crossing the words Aunt Emily denies to accept herself as Japanese race. She rejects her cultural identity and assumes the self imposed identity in which she sees herself as a Canadian woman. I am not sure if we can call it a self imposition because we see that the imposition is made by the social and political rejection of Japanese Canadians. The words "Japanese race" and Aunt Emily's sentence "You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee." functions like a refrain in the novel and, as such, is crucial to the understanding of Aunt Emily. Much as the character of Aunt Emily becomes a realization of the first sentence, her emphasis on being Canadian is firmly connected

to this second one. Again, the statement is ironic. On the surface, it is a comment on the problem of national identity. It also speaks of the history and the past that has to be remembered and not erased. We might say that in expressing herself she flaunts the line between herself and her history. Furthermore, the notion of being Canadian resonates with Aunt Emily's somewhat tenuous identity; it is connected with both Canada's colonial history and its politics. The words "Japanese race" inflected with issues of internment and Japanese immigrants/ citizen's relations in this new situation. This particular term, specifically in the context of the phrase in which it surfaces, functions to further establish Canadian Japanese as a "criminalized" figure. Aunt Emily rejects this by assuming an imposed identity as she says "For better or worse, *I am Canadian*" (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 48). For uncle Sam she is "Nisei, not very Japanese like". (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 48).

After Naomi has grown up, Aunt Emily urges her to remember and to speak of the persecution she suffered: "You have to remember," Aunt Emily said. [...] Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene." (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 49-50).

But for Naomi it is to take Obasan's stance against Aunt Emily: "Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. Didn't Obasan once say, 'It is better to forget'? . . . What is past recall is past pain". (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 45).

Going through a painful process of remembering Naomi, the protagonist, challenges the official version about the internment of Japanese people: "'Grinning and happy' and all smiles standing around a pile of beets? That is one telling. It's not how it was" (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 197). The facts about "evacuation on Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot" the memories of past becomes a torture hence she "cannot bear the memory". (KOGAWA, 1981, p. 194). The young female protagonist Naomi's identity forms as she vacillates between her Japanese origin, the cultural values of her family and the Canadian culture, the culture of the country of her birth. In case of Obasan and Naomi the silence and isolation are part of Japanese identity but in the case of Aunt Emily this isolation seems to be self-inflicted. She forces herself to be the Canadian hence she rejects the very traits of her origin. Such denial comes from the imposition of a new identity she assumes to be accepted in her society.

In *Obasan* Kogawa creates a situation in which the identity is both constructed and imposed. In case of Naomi and Obasan the acceptance of situation

and adjustment does not lead to the problematic situation aunt Emily faces. For her it is an imposition of identity which if the situations were different she might not have assumed. As Elenora Rao observes, "By disrupting the possibility of a homogeneous national identity and the idea of home, *Obasan* creates a destabilized space from which Naomi begins to reconstruct her history and identity. The representations of the landscapes, across which Naomi and her family are forced to move, serve to show how unstable national identities are, and how such identities are shaped by the intersections of historical circumstances and the physical landscape . . ." Angelika Bammer has remarked, they "are always constructed and lived out on the historical terrain between necessity and choice, the place where oppression and resistance are simultaneously created" (BAMMER, 1994).

Concluding, we can say that the struggle these two characters undergo suggests a re-conception of the immigrants as a multicultural citizen that has been emerging in through the development of Canadian cultural politics during and after the II World War. In focusing on Japanese immigrants and Canadian Japanese, in the *Obasan*, Kogawa does more than legitimize the notion of immigrant's identity as a constructed identity and the Canadian Japanese identity as both constructed (in case of Naomi) and imposed identity (in case of aunt Emily) that brings to light a complex set of discourses and identity formations which continues to shape the development of Canadian multiculturalism. I have also attempted to open in my reading of this novel the question of relationship between the Japanese immigrants Issei and Canadian Japanese Nisei. The development of subject positions which leads to the emergence of Canadian citizens as a historically contingent figure -- the invisible identity of immigrant women in the cultural mosaic of a new Canadian Multiculturalism.

Abstract: The problematic identity construction of female immigrants, their attempt to integrate into the new environment created by the Canadian Immigrant Policies for the intern Japanese during the World War II and their protest against this humiliating situation are the focus of present paper. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* presents a situation where the immigrants are posed in a conflicting situation. The direct encounter between the immigrant Canadians and the native Canadians in an unequal, unbalanced setting, a specific political situation, leads to a victim/victimizer relationship discussed by Homi Bhabha and poses them in what he calls the "ambivalence in the relationship" in the context of post-colonial

discourse. The potential for resistance and subversion, in this imbalanced tension which emerges is of particular relevance to present study. The paper highlights the difference between the Issei – Canadian residents, born or raised in Japan – and the Nisei--people of Japanese extraction, born and raised in Canada to show how this distinction leads them to adopt different measures. The argument is constructed around the role of culture as they react to this specific situation, the silent protest of one aunt and the open and direct resistance to oppression or injustice by the other aunt. The paper concludes that the two obasans or aunts, in Kogawa's novel, present two different forms of female resistance to the ordeal of internment in Canada which are rooted in the cultures in which they were brought up.

Keywords: identity, culture, female immigrants, japanese internment, World War II

Résumé: La construction problématique de l'identité d'immigrants féminins, leur tentative de s'intégrer dans la nouvelle ambiance créée par la Politique d'Immigration Canadienne de l'"internment" japonais, pendant la II Guerre Mondiale et leur protestation contre cette situation humiliante, sont la visée du présent travail. L'œuvre *Obasan*, de Joy Kogawa, présente une situation où les conflits deviennent inévitables pour les immigrants. L'affrontement direct entre les immigrants canadiens et les Canadiens natifs montre un rapport inégal, déséquilibré, une situation politique spécifique, qui les met dans un rapport de "victime/ victime" discuté par Homi Bhabha et qui met en évidence ce qu'il appelle "l'ambivalence dans le rapport" dans le contexte du discours post-colonial. Le potentiel de résistance et de subversion, dans cette tension émergente, est très important dans ce travail. On y confronte la différence entre les *Issei* – résidents canadiens nés ou grandis au Japon – et les *Nisei* – les personnes d'origine japonaise nées et grandies au Canada, pour montrer comment cela les amène à adopter des mesures différentes. L'argument est construit autour du rôle de la culture, qui explique comment les personnages réagissent à cette situation spécifique, la protestation silencieuse d'une tante et la résistance ouverte et directe à l'oppression ou à l'injustice assumée par une autre tante. On conclut que les deux *obasans* ou tantes, dans l'ouvrage de Kogawa, présentent deux formes de résistante féminine à l'internation au Canada, des formes enracinées dans les cultures dans lesquelles elles ont été élevées.

Mots-clés: identité; culture; immigrants féminins; "internment" japonais; Seconde Guerre Mondiale.

Notas

- ¹ The word “*obasan*” in Japanese language means “aunt”.
- ² Since its publication in 1981, *Obasan* received wide critical acclaim. The New York Times Book Review considered it “brilliantly poetic in its sensibility.” It received the Canadian Authors’ Association Book of the Year Award and the first annual Books in Canada Novel Award, and it has been included in literature and social sciences courses throughout North America. Kogawa has held several writer-in-residence positions at Canadian universities. In 1986 she published the story of Naomi in form of children’s book *Naomi’s Road* and The story of *Obasan*’s now matured narrator *Itsuka* followed in 1992. Since its publication in 1981, *Obasan* received wide critical acclaim. The New York Times Book Review considered it “brilliantly poetic in its sensibility.” It received the Canadian Authors’ Association Book of the Year Award and the first annual Books in Canada Novel Award, and it has been included in literature and social sciences courses throughout North America. Kogawa has held several writer-in-residence positions at Canadian universities. In 1986 she published the story of Naomi in form of children’s book *Naomi’s Road* and The story of *Obasan*’s now matured narrator *Itsuka* followed in 1992.
- ³ For a reading of *Obasan* in the light of Homi Bhabha and on the concept of nation, see Amoko (2000).
- ⁴ By the early 1900s the Issei (first generation immigrants) family resembled its counterpart in Japan, and Japanese clubs kept alive the traditions of the old country. By the early 1900s the Issei (first generation immigrants) family resembled its counterpart in Japan, and Japanese clubs kept alive the traditions of the old country.
- ⁵ It is amazing that despite going through same experience as their North American counterpart, so far we see not much coverage about their feelings in Brazilian literature. So far I could get only one film “*Gaijin*” (1980) directed by Tizuka Yamasaki and Fernando Morais’s novel *Corações sujos* (2000) that deal with the Brazilian Japanese experience after Pearl Harbor.
- ⁶ Tough the novel has been the center of critical attention I could not find any paper length study on portrayal of Japanese immigrants, specifically of the Japanese women in *Obasan*.

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