

THE RIDDLE OF CONCENTRIC WORLDS IN "OBASAN"

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J OY KOGAWA'S *Obasan* is an extremely quiet, slow moving book that yields its secret of exceptional power and intensity only gradually. It takes time to pick up the rich reverberations beneath the calm, controlled narrative voice, as we become aware that in returning to her past, the narrator, Naomi, undertakes a spiritual journey; she is urged by an inner need to find answers to a series of compelling questions: Is there a meaning to the persecution and suffering endured by the Japanese Canadians during and after World War II? Can the victim overcome the paralyzing effect of personal hurt and humiliation? Can a human being ever come to terms with the experience of evil on the psychological, the political, the universal level?

The novel sets up these multi-dimensional questions as puzzles arranged in a concentric pattern — container hidden within container within container — creating a sense of mystery and tension. The deliberate visibility of the concentric structure compels the reader to search for a central meaning at the core of the multi-layered texture of Naomi's narrative. To enter the psychological, political, and universal dimensions of Naomi's dilemma, the novel provides three openings, three distinct, yet interrelated landscapes. It is the first and shortest opening, the motto of the book, which introduces the widest, the universal dimension.

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 . . .¹

A quotation from the Book of Revelation, the motto introduces the cosmic-mythical symbols of renewal the narrator is in search of. 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.

The second opening is another piece of preliminary material, a description of the narrator's soul as a wasteland.

There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes 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. I admit it.

I hate the stillness. I hate the stone. I hate the sealed vault with its cold icon. I hate staring into the night, the questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes.

Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream.

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.

The stillness of the landscape is the stillness of hopelessness, despair, the dead stillness of stone. To “overcome” her personal trial, Naomi must see the stone of death turn into the “white stone” with the “new name” on it. 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.

Not before the cosmic and internal landscapes reveal these symbolic-emotional signposts are we ready to enter the “real” Canadian landscape in the first chapter (the third opening). Here it becomes quickly apparent that elements of the two symbolic landscapes — stone, underground stream, seeds, flowers, and trees — will also figure in the realistic presentation of this specific scene carefully identified in time and space. Thus the natural setting in the first chapter is more than background: it represents the stillness and the tension in the cosmos and in the soul:

9.05 p.m. August 9, 1972.

The coulee is so still right now that if a match were to be lit, the flame would not waver. The tall grasses stand without quivering, the tops flow this way and that. The whole dark sky is bright with stars and only the new moon moves . . .

The human characters in this landscape are Naomi, our Nisei, second generation Japanese Canadian narrator, and her old Uncle Isamu who have been making an annual pilgrimage to this site every August for the past eighteen years. In the first of many flashbacks the narrator returns to August 1954, the time of their first visit, and we begin to recognize the first sign of a mystery, and within it an intricate puzzle: Uncle’s determination to observe this ritual is equal to his desire to keep its reason a secret. Here the question Naomi had been consumed by all her life takes a fairly simple form: “Why do we come here every year?” she asks. Not until the end of the novel will she find the answer.

Each of the opening landscapes contains a riddle: in the first, the hidden manna; in the second, the hidden voice; in the third, the hidden reason for the pilgrimages. To triumph over the stillness of death, we must find what is hidden, kept in secret. Adding to this suspense is our recognition that the relationship between the three landscapes is itself a riddle: each contains and is contained within the other. In this conundrum of container within container within container, the author also offers us a key to approach the puzzle at the heart of Naomi's quest for liberation and renewal. There will be only one solution to the three riddles, three questions. As if by magic, it will be the same answer that will resolve Naomi's dilemma in its personal, political, and universal dimensions.

There is suspense as we become immersed in *Obasan's* allegorical language. A consistent nature symbolism emerges that challenges us to ask: What is the precise connection between the evocative language of the landscape and the unfolding of the human drama? The narrative framework will help answer the question: When in the second chapter Naomi learns about Uncle's death, she returns to comfort her Aunt Obasan and to prepare for the funeral. The rest of the novel takes shape as a mourner's meditation during a wake,² a framework well suited to the novel's central metaphor of spiritual journey and its traditional nature symbolism. Waiting for Uncle's funeral, Naomi recollects her memories about all the dead in her past. Obasan and Uncle had been the mainstay of Naomi's traumatic childhood, since both she and her brother had been torn from their parents during the times of racist discrimination against Japanese Canadians between 1942 and 1951. By the end of her meditation about her family's tragic history, Naomi achieves a clarity and perception that comes from "emotion recollected in tranquillity" and she is finally allowed to hear the secret that had been withheld from her. With Obasan's permission, the Anglican clergyman, Sensei, who arrived to conduct the funeral, decides to read aloud the mysterious Japanese document, a letter on blue rice paper that had been in Obasan's possession for the past eighteen years. From the letter Naomi learns about her mother's suffering and death in Japan as a result of the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. She finally understands the reason for the pilgrimages; Uncle observed the ritual to honour Mother's memory, although in respect of her wishes, he had to keep her death and its circumstances a secret from the children. In the last chapter, which deals with the morning after this revelation, 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.

For the landscape to come alive, the dead stone had to turn into the "white stone"; the tree to bear fruit, the seed to flower, the stone had to join with the living waters. The final scene in the novel celebrates the breath of new life as the harmonious dance uniting trees, flowers, white stone, and water:

Above the trees, the moon is pure white stone. The reflection is rippling in the river, water and stone dancing. Their joining together is the breath of life. It is a quiet ballet, soundless as breath.

The first and last chapters, then, are symmetrical like book ends. In the first chapter a question is asked, a puzzle set up. In the last chapter the question is answered, the puzzle resolved. In the first chapter the narrator embarks on her quest through the landscape: "Like the grass, I search the earth and the sky with a thin but persistent thirst." She thirsts for an answer for the unexplained, mysterious aspects of her childhood, the disappearing of her mother, the deportation of her people from British Columbia, the breaking-up of families, the confiscation of their property, the waves of war hysteria turned against the "treacherous yellow peril" of Japanese Canadians. Only through articulating the pain of the past will she find hope for liberation, healing, and renewal for herself and her people. In her search of the "freeing word," Naomi must overcome thirty years of paralyzing silence, hurt, humiliation; as a character in, and the narrator of the story, she must break the "stillness of the stone."

The Journey through Silence: Plot and Characterization

Obasan is a book about silence. The narrator is an extraordinarily quiet child whose relatives often wonder if she is in fact not mute. But this muteness is a deliberate withdrawal into silence. It is a child's resentful response to a world which has wounded her anonymously, impersonally, inexplicably. The most poignant contribution of this highly poetic book is the experience in which the little girl, who in the course of the novel has grown into a lonely and unhappy adult, is compelled to transform the silence of shame, hurt, and abandonment into words. Alerted by the symbolic landscapes, we witness an almost breathless quality as the narrative unfolds; silence on the verge of turning into sound. Silence speaks many tongues in this novel. For *Obasan*, silence is the language of service to the family, the language of her prayers. Uncle's silence is that of old Japanese Canadians who feel that the injustice and discrimination of a whole decade should be kept quiet. "In the world there is no better place . . . There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude."

Within the family is a conflict between the long oriental tradition of silence dictated by modesty, moderation, and stoicism, and Aunt Emily's "Western" compulsion to speak up and bring justice.³ An active member of committees organizing inquests, petitions and conferences to combat discrimination, Aunt Emily is strident, angry, and dynamic. It is Aunt Emily who urges Naomi not to forget: "You are your history . . . If you cut it off, you're an amputee. Denial is gangrene." Her diagnosis is correct. For years Naomi's nightmares have been images of mutilation and death, and as she keeps going back and forth between

her school in Cecil and Uncle's house in Granton, she is unable to go ahead in her own world, unable to stay with the old people in theirs.

Yet, Naomi is reluctant to take on the burden of commitment, and Aunt Emily's package of documents, diaries, and newspaper clippings lies abandoned and forgotten for years. Only when Obasan hands it to her before Uncle's funeral is Naomi finally compelled to read and respond to Aunt Emily's factual, angry, accusing testament. Naomi's response is distinctly different. She speaks in the first person singular; she describes only memories, a young child's experiences, set in the present. In spite of the strong political commitment that will, albeit reluctantly, emerge from the book, Naomi's narrative is both a child's recollection and the recollection of childhood. What she recaptures is the genuine feeling of childhood: unable to see what the next step may bring, unable to understand the causal connection between events, she is genuinely groping.

Tactile and auditory images are predominant. Visual images are sketchy, like line drawings, mere background to the far richer, more modulated sense of touch and sound. We learn for example that Naomi's mother was "yasashi," had a quality of softness, but this refers more to her inner being than to any quality we could visualize. Remarkably, the characters are almost faceless. The simplicity of their portrayal and lack of individual detail is reminiscent of folk and fairytales. We meet characters in their roles as grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt, teacher, clergyman, only to recognize that they all share one quality: the silent dignity of self-respect and duty towards the community. Regardless of how close they may be to the narrator, the characters are generalized, often allegorical. Even Obasan is more of an attitude, a presence:

Squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, she is every old woman in every hamlet in the world . . . Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite personal details.

This method of distant, linear, and external characterization allows the author to develop a collective portraiture of human dignity in the face of aggression, of a tradition based on the profound regard for the vulnerabilities of the old, the young, and on mutual respect.

The scarcity of closeups, the lack of individual detail also allows for another effect. By the end of the novel Obasan emerges as every old woman who owns the earth: she becomes larger than life, holding the secret to mysteries, "the bearer of keys to unknown doorways." Another character who achieves such an allegorical presence is Naomi's mother. In the beginning she exists only as a photograph, associated with a colourful quilt, the tender music of nursery rhymes. Even at the end when we learn about her tragic fate in Nagasaki — the dramatic and symbolic centre of the book — we still have no individual portrait of her. Mother's role, or rather her absence, is nevertheless crucial in Naomi's characterization.

After the paradise of childhood in which they are one, Mother suddenly leaves. It turns out to be their final separation; Naomi does not cry, but she does not smile or speak either.

The “rift” of separation and alienation remains unhealed even in the later years of relative peace and contentment. Twenty odd years after the traumatic experiences of her childhood, Naomi is a middle-aged, single, and rather frustrated schoolteacher, still blocked and benumbed by the experience. Doubtful about her own sexuality and ethnic identity, she is not attracted or attractive to the opposite sex, and in her own estimation she has “the social graces of a common housefly.” She admits that “None of my friends today are Japanese Canadians”; yet she also feels resentment and suspicion of white Canadians. As a result of her dilemma, she withdraws into silence. What she says about her pupils describes her as well: “It is the children who say nothing who are in real trouble, more than the ones who complain.”

Weaving the Web of Silence: Language and Metaphor

Since the entire book is a document of silence turning into sound, we become intensely aware of the burden carried by language in this invocation of the consciousness of a silent people. To say that Joy Kogawa has a language of her own is not sufficient. Many good poets or writers do achieve that. But in Naomi’s narration one often has the feeling that the writer is virtually reinventing language. Unmistakably, the style is the result of extensive linguistic experimentation, presenting us with the special flavour of Japanese Canadian speech patterns and their underlying sensibilities.⁴ The writer translates Japanese expressions, often including the Japanese turn of thought. Occasionally she mixes English words with Japanese: “Nothing changes me, I say.”

Yet none of these devices can explain the suggestive cadences of the dialogue, for example, when Uncle is looking at the thirty-six-year-old Naomi: “Too young . . . Still too young.” There are a lot of passive constructions: we cannot see, we cannot know the source of action. What is visible is only the subject acted upon. “Too much old man,” he says and totters back . . . “Mo ikutsu? What is your age now?” And when the old people refuse to give answers to Naomi’s repeated questions, their evasions sound like age old proverbs — “Everyone some day dies,” or “Still young, too young. Some day.” — that have to be decoded, solved like a riddle to get to the true meaning. The truncated sentences have their own slow movement: “Burredo. Try. Good.” Some sentences consist of nouns without verbs, or only of adjectives: “Now old,” Obasan reports. “Everything old.” Yet, in the hands of the skilful narrator-recorder this elliptical, barren language reminds the reader of the poetic quality of child’s language, or of Shelley’s definition of the language of the poet-Maker: it is vitally metaphorical.

The descriptions have a concrete, literal, imagistic quality. Yet, the poet-writer's strategies are also quite consistent in guiding our response to the world she presents. First she would carefully describe the natural phenomenon, creating an image in its "sensuous particularity." Then she proceeds to make further use of this image just created by relating it to the human world. By this method she assumes a fairly extensive control over our response. To look at one example: after Uncle's death, Obasan and Naomi go up to the attic to look for some old family documents, and they see a spider's web:

As she pushes a box aside, she stretches the corner of a spider's web, exquisitely symmetrical, balanced between the box and the magazines. A round black blot, large as a cat's eye, suddenly sprouts legs and ambles across the web. Shaking it . . . I recoil, jerking my arm up, sending the beam of light over the ceiling and a whole cloudy scene of carnage. Ugh! What a sight! A graveyard and feasting ground combined . . . But we're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead — all our dead — those who refuse to bury themselves. Like threads of old spider webs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles.

By now the conceit — the extended metaphor of man ensnared by the past as the poor insect is ensnared by the imperceptibly fast formation of the spider web — is taking shape in front of our eyes. It is an association the writer is testing out in its various aspects, but an association built on an image she had first created for us to see and touch — an earned association. And by weaving the metaphor with us, she also engages us in the puzzle, the central puzzle in Naomi's life:

Just a glimpse of a worn-out patchwork of quilt and the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return? After all these years, I find myself wondering, but with the dullness of expecting no response. "Please tell me about Mother," I would say as a child to Obasan. I was consumed by the question. Devoured alive.

The literal, down-to-earth associations behind the "complex puzzles" make it truly exciting that the narrator is "devoured alive." There is an imperceptible, sinister, extremely able spider working somewhere in the cosmos to set up these intriguing puzzles, and together with the narrator we are compelled to seek answers. "But Obasan gave me no answers. I did not have, I have never had, the key to the vault of her thoughts. Even now, I have no idea what urgency prompts her to explore this attic at midnight."

This, simply in terms of the naturalistic action, would be a very quiet, and not necessarily tense scene. And yet, in spite of the naturalistic quality of the everyday event, we become aware of a deeper, underlying significance, the tension of a barely named, yet fundamental anxiety: Is life meaningless, will death devour us as the spider's web devours its captives?

I notice these days, from time to time, how the present disappears in her mind. The past hungers for her. Feasts on her. And when its feasting is complete? She will dance and dangle in the dark, like small insect bones, a fearful calligraphy — a dry reminder that once there was life fitting in the weather.

Death, old age, mutability — these are traditional themes for meditation, particularly appropriate within the framework of a wake for the dead. But here these traditional themes suddenly become vital in the context of the mourner's life. They become the centre of concern, of anxiety. The dancing and dangling of the small insect bones in the dark is a particularly painful definition of the cruelty and meaninglessness of life as seen through the eyes of a victim. Both the excitement of being "devoured alive" and of the past "feasting" on the old woman in death hint at the horror of existence with an intensity much stronger than that of any explicit explanation.

Kogawa's style is characterized by a controlled, concrete, non-subjective quality. The development of a theme begins with the keen impartial observation of natural phenomena as if observed by the objective gaze of a microscopic eye. No subjective, certainly no sentimental elements enter into the description; the voice is cold, almost clinical. Then, unexpectedly, this extremely concrete, specific image turns up, still in full closeup, to offer an analogy for the description of human motivation: suddenly it becomes internalized and humanized, yet loses none of its power through the process of generalization or abstraction. And as the insect caught in the spider's web is transformed to take on the characteristics of a human being, horror is seen in closeup through unflinching, open eyes. One of the most disturbing images in the book relates to Naomi's nightmare in which the Grand Inquisitor pries open her eyes. How different is this from traditional (Western or romantic) associations of evil with darkness. In this novel we are confronted with the mystery of evil in its most everyday manifestations and in forcibly full daylight.

The First Circle: The Puzzle in its Political Dimensions

On the political level the mystery of evil assumes the form of the following questions. Who is responsible? How can all this evil be explained? Why did all this have to happen to us, Japanese Canadians? Will it happen again to any minority in Canada? "Write the vision and make it plain [on tables]." It is ironic that the piece of paper with these words of the Old Testament prophet fell out of the documents Aunt Emily has prepared for Naomi. Moving as those documents are, it is through the silent Naomi's personal recollections that we ultimately get the impression of having heard the word of the prophet, the seer.

Aunt Emily's prose is expository: the voice is strident, angry, polemical. She feels that "the war was just an excuse for the racism that was already there," and looking around she sees "Racism . . . the Nazis . . . everywhere." She registers

shock and astonishment that Canada could have fallen into the trap: "Germany. That country is openly totalitarian. But Canada is supposed to be a democracy," and she cries out against "undemocratic racial antagonism — which is exactly what our democratic country is supposed to be fighting against." In writing to her sister, Naomi's mother, she also points out the bitter irony in the Japanese immigrants' situation: "We're the enemy. And what about you there? Have they arrested you because you are Canadian?" She is indignant, "What this country did to us, it did to itself." There is no doubt that her determination to bring justice often verges on the heroic:

Out loud I said: "Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?" "Dead?" she asked. "I am not dead. You're not dead, Who's dead?" "But you can't fight a whole country." I said. "We are the country" she answered.

Yet, in spite of this passion and commitment worthy of the Old Testament prophet, Naomi finds that Aunt Emily's words "are not made flesh," and she sighs in frustration: "All my prayers disappear into space."

Aunt Emily's documents cannot help Naomi come to terms with her own bitterness and frustration: "Greed, selfishness and hatred remain as constant as the human condition, do they not? . . . Is there evidence for optimism?" Unlike Aunt Emily, Naomi feels that "time has solved few mysteries. War and rumours of war, racial hatreds and fears are with us still." As a result, she is slightly contemptuous of those who still "dance to the multicultural piper's tune." Her scepticism of the dream of a multicultural Canadian identity is dispelled only indirectly, and only in instances when she turns her attention to the Canadian landscape.

1942

We are leaving the BC coast — rain, cloud, mist — an air overladen with weeping . . . We are going down to the middle of the earth . . . carried along by the momentum of the expulsion into the waiting wilderness . . . we are the man in the Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of light. We are sent . . . to the sending that we may bring sight.

It is only in this sudden double exposure between the landscape and the people that she finds a ray of hope. In this perspective the human ordeal may assume Biblical significance, as the Japanese Canadians become the eyes for the Canadian community as a whole. Through their suffering they "bring sight," making sure that no minority is treated with injustice in the future.

Again and again it is less through the people than through the landscape that she approaches the troubled question of her Canadian identity.

Where do any of us come from in this cold country? Oh, Canada. Whether it is admitted or not, we come from you, we come from you. From the same soil, from the cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth. We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. We come from Canada, this land that is like every land, filled with the wise, the fearful, the compassionate, the corrupt.

It is more from Naomi's internal, private grief than from Aunt Emily's public statements that we understand the puzzle of political evil. Canada fell victim to the hysteria — fear, greed, the need for a scapegoat — it was fighting against. And it is through Naomi's private vision at the end that we approach the resolution of this political dilemma. When in the last scene it becomes clear to Naomi that this is the land where she wants to lay her dead ones to rest, she is no longer haunted by the "cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth": In her new vision the entire landscape of "Uncle's spot" is permeated with the "sweet and faint" perfume of "the wild roses and the tiny wildflowers that grow along the trickling stream." The flowers of the Canadian soil are joining in the ritual of "water and stone dancing" — the Japanese ritual of the graceful dignified funerary flower dance finally becomes a ritual of acceptance and reconciliation.⁵

The Second Circle: The Puzzle in its Personal-Psychological Dimension

In her quest for enlightenment and spiritual liberation the narrator is aware that "Beneath the grass [is] the speaking dream and beneath the dream is the sensate sea." To reach the currents of the "living word," she has to reach down to the "underground stream," plumb the depth of memories, associations, dreams, the depth of the subconscious. Her dreams — each followed by her own interpretation and explication — play a significant role in delineating her journey in search of articulation and self-understanding: ultimately psychological liberation. The first dream demonstrates how easily and gracefully the author moves not only between the various timeplanes, but also between the naturalistic and the symbolic dimensions in the novel:

Early in the still grey morning I can hear Obasan emptying her chamber pot in the toilet. I wait until she returns to her bed before I drift off again. Haze. Cloud. Again the descent.

On its surface the dream is ominous, but at this point not yet openly horrible. The dreamer sees a man and a woman in a landscape: "with a sickle she is harvesting the forest debris, gathering the branches into piles." He is a "British martinet. It is evident that he is in command. With his pruner's shears he is cutting the trees." At first the scene seems to be describing merely the endlessness of physical labour, obviously a memory from the work in Alberta in the late 1940's, the memory of weeding beets: "It is hard . . . with my hoe . . . and on the end of the long long row and the next and the next . . . weeding and weeding and weeding." And as the dream figures join in the dehumanizing, soundless labour "like an orchestra of fog," Naomi is once more reminded of her feeling that the whole family had turned into automatons: "We work together all day. At night we eat and sleep. We hardly talk any more."

Of course the personal recollection is merely the raw material of the dream which will yield its proper meaning only in the context of the dreamer's entire inscape. On the political level, the interpretation is fairly obvious: the man is a British martinet, indifferent to the destruction and the suffering he causes. He is in uniform and ready to kill, to obey orders unquestioningly. But beyond the political interpretation, the sickle and the endless movement should also alert us to another analogy, to the figure "with sharp sickle . . . [who was] gathering the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great vinepress of the wrath of God . . . and blood came out . . ." (Rev. 14. 14-20). The strange beast accompanying him — lion or dog or lion dog — is also familiar from the context: the landscape is that of the Book of Revelation, the vision preceding that of the Apocalypse. But the dream also adds its own interpretations to the archetypal manifestation of destruction: in Naomi's eyes evil becomes the result of an inhuman, mechanical obedience. The apocalyptic figure, the personification of destruction, is a martinet; his beast is a robot with a plastic mouth, and the woman is held together by metallic hinges — they manifest the destructiveness of evil as part of our unfeeling, indifferent, machine-like civilization.

At this point the dream scenery changes and the dreamer catches a glance of Uncle making a ceremonial bow: he has a rose with an endless stem in his mouth, acting out part of a ritual for the dead. The dreamer also catches sight of a figure behind him, but before she could discern the identity of this figure, it disappears and Naomi wakes up. To solve the personal-psychological dimensions of her puzzle Naomi should overcome the recurring threats of violation and be able to complete the peaceful, dignified measures of the funerary flower dance. Accordingly, the second nightmare picks up on both motives. To begin with, there is the threat again: soldiers in uniform, sickles turned into bayonets, paralyzing fear and nausea. The narrator has this dream after, and as it were in conjunction with, a painful recollection of a traumatic sexual experience as a five-year-old in Vancouver before the war:

His name is Old Man Gower. He lives next door. I can see his house beyond the peach tree from my bedroom window. His belly is large and soft. His hair is thin and brown and the top of his head is a shiny skin cap. When he lifts me up in his arms, I do not wish him to lift me up but I do not know what is it to struggle. Every time he carries me away, he tells me I must not tell my mother. He asks me questions as he holds me but I do not answer.

Through their juxtaposition in the narrative, there is no doubt that this long-buried accident from early childhood — the experience of violation — is closely related to the recurring nightmare:

Two weeks ago, the day of our first staff meeting at Cecil Consolidated, there was that dream again. The dream had a new and terrible ending. In earlier versions there was flight, terror and pursuit. The only way to be saved from harm was to

become seductive. In this latest dream, three beautiful oriental woman lay naked in the muddy road, flat on their backs, their faces turned to the sky. They were lying straight as coffins, spaced several feet apart. They were lying perpendicular to the road like railway ties. Several soldiers stood or shuffled in front of them in the foreground. It appeared they were guarding these women who were probably prisoners captured from a nearby village. The woman closeby made a simpering coy gesture with her hands. She touched her hair and wiggled her body slightly — seductively. An almost inaudible whimper or sob was drowned in her chest. She was trying to use the only weapon she had — her desirability. She lay on the edge of nausea, stretched between hatred and lust. The soldiers could not be won. Dread and a deathly loathing cut through the women.

The dream acts out the mutually corrupting relationship between victim and victimizer. The victim would like to win over the aggressor, to seduce him. The process is humiliating and self-destructive. The aggressor has a sadistic enjoyment of power — he has the bayonet, the uniform, while the victims are defenceless and naked. In the very process the victims experience the nausea of shame and self-loathing — the denial of their own humanity. This self-loathing is becoming a sense of paralysis, the inability to move.

The metaphor of rape and the victim's ensuing shame and paralysis works also on the level of the political allegory. In Naomi's dreams the sexual aggressors are always white soldiers in uniform. And when we come to young Stephen's response to the persecution of the Japanese Canadians, we realize that rape is used as metaphor for any kind of violation or victimization:

One day Stephen comes home from school, his glasses broken, black tear stains on his face.

"What happened?" I whisper as Stephen comes up the stairs.

He does not answer me. Is he ashamed, as I was in Old Man Gower's bathroom? Should I go away?

Although Stephen's experience does not display the sexual overtones of Naomi's nightmare, he also undergoes the typical symptoms of shame, paralysis, and self-loathing. As a child he develops a limp, has to wear a cast, and walk on crutches. As for his self-loathing, it is demonstrated by his lifelong difficulty in accepting his ethnic, family background. Although he feels guilty about it, he is ill at ease with Uncle and Obasan and painfully avoids their company.

Yet, violation for Naomi has consequences even more serious than for Stephen. In the course of her recollections she describes herself as suffering from a wound: "In my dreams a small child sits with a wound on her knees. The wound on her knees is on the back of her skull, large and moist. A double wound." The wound on the knee alludes to the sexual wound, to an incident with Old Man Gower: "One does not resist adults. But I know this is unnecessary for my knee. He is only pretending to fix my scratch." Just as important is the wound on the "back of her skull," the wound that comes from the victim's internalization of guilt of

violation, the unhealing “seepage” of guilt and shame in her consciousness — the wound that Naomi shares with the rest of her people, possibly with most victims of violation.

This is not the first time that the nightmare has acted out her traumatic experience with Old Man Gower: the nightmare is a recurring one. At this time, however, Naomi reaches a new stage of understanding when she asks: “Does Old Man Gower still walk through the hedges between our houses in Vancouver, in Slocan, in Cecil?” Through this comment she acknowledges that she has been under the spell of, indeed haunted by this trauma throughout her childhood (Vancouver), her adolescence (Slocan), and her adult years (Cecil). The pain of the memory and the recurring nightmares indicate to the adult Naomi that she is still paralyzed by the same shame, helplessness, and self-loathing, feelings she has to overcome before she can finally liberate herself from the past.

The child Naomi’s experience in Old Man Gower’s hands is traumatic because it disrupts her natural childhood existence, her oneness with Mother:

I am clinging to my mother’s leg, a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am the offshoot — a young branch attached by right of flesh and blood. Where she is rooted, I am rooted. If she walks, I will walk. Her blood is whispering through my veins. The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts.

“Don’t tell your mother”, he whispers into my ear . . . Where in the darkness has my mother gone?”

Naomi describes her sense of loss and alienation in terms of a tormented landscape:

But here in Mr. Gower’s hands I become other — a parasite on her body, no longer of her mind . . . If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I will be torn from her. But the secret has already separated us. His hands are frightening and pleasureable. In the centre of my body is a rift . . . In my childhood dream the mountain yawns apart as the chasm spreads. My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half.

This rift, the chasm of separation, is a recurring motif in the book, especially since the incident with Mr. Gower was followed closely by the actual separation from Mother. “It is around this time that Mother disappears. I hardly dare to think, let alone ask why she has to leave.” Naomi feels torn, amputated by her sexual experience. Tormented by guilt, she feels that her abandonment by Mother must be punishment for her unmentionable offence, her fall from innocence. Only at the end of the novel, when she receives the message of Mother’s love, will she experience the healing of the rift in her cosmos. She understands then that it was not her guilt that brought about Mother’s departure. Her Mother had to leave and stay away out of love. As a result, it becomes clear to the adult Naomi that

she could not have been guilty, and, what is just as important, that she was always loved, that she can be loved, that she is lovable.

Of course nobody could convey this message to Naomi until she becomes ready to receive it, and it is the third dream that takes her to the final point in her journey, to understanding and receptivity. This final dream is that of the Grand Inquisitor, and once more it is a dream which begins with a vision of the threat of violation: "Always I dream of soldiers eager for murder, their weapons ready. We die again and again. In my dreams we are never safe enough." Yet, the dream also carries on the interrupted flower ceremony from the first dream, and by now the figure who then disappeared is ready to reveal herself to the dreamer:

Mother stood in the centre. In her mouth she held a knotted string stem, like the twine and string of Obasan's ball which she keeps in the pantry. From the stem hung a red rose, red as a heart.

At this point, however, the dream reaches a different stage. Nevertheless, because of the peculiar patterns of dream-logic, both stages will prove instrumental in pointing the dreamer toward her resolution:

Was it then that the nightmare began? The skin of the air became closer and denser, a formless hair vest. Up from the valley there rose a dark cloud — a great cape. It was the Grand Inquisitor descending over us, the top of his head a shiny skin cap. With his large hands he was prying open my mother's lips, prying open my eyes. I fell and cried out.

In Dostoyevski's story the Grand Inquisitor is sitting in judgement over Christ, prying, tormenting him with questions. In her dream Naomi has a vision of Mother's face torn and her own eyes being pried open. Interpreting this dream, she makes a sudden discovery about herself: "How the Grand Inquisitor gnaws at my bones," she cries out. She now comes to the realization that by her ceaseless questioning and prying she has been guilty of taking on the role of the Grand Inquisitor, of making judgement over her dead Mother. She makes a decision to give up her determined search, to have faith in Mother's love and to accept its silence. Only when willing to "admit" this silence, will it open itself to her. Paradoxically, Naomi cannot receive the message she so eagerly has searched for until she learns to give up the search; until she learns to affirm the mystery that her Mother's love had been all pervasive although it had been silent.

Only after she has her last dream and succeeds in finding its interpretation will Naomi receive the detailed description of her mother's martyrdom and the long awaited proof of her silent love. The book culminates in Chapter 37 which describes Mother's horrible ordeal in Nagasaki, a vision that has been prepared by numerous allusions and Biblical images throughout. In the light of this vision all the accumulated puzzles of Naomi's life receive their solution, albeit a solution in the light of a tragic illumination:

In the dark Slocan night, the bright light flares in my dreaming. I hear the screams and feel the mountain breaking. Your long black hair falls and falls into the chasm. My legs are sawn in half. The skin on your face bubbles like lava and melts from your bones. Mother, I see your face. Do not turn aside.

In the light of the Nagasaki conflagration, all the disasters in the life of the Japanese Canadian family pale in comparison. Yet, the disasters that befell Naomi and her family in Canada also had anticipated this disaster. In the same way all of Naomi's nightmares are pale in comparison to this ultimate nightmare vision of cosmic proportions — the total annihilation of the world as a result of the overpowering forces of evil — yet her dreams also anticipate, foreshadow this vision of the Last Judgement, the end of the world.

The Third Circle: The Puzzle in its Cosmic Dimension

Once she is allowed to hear the content of the letter on the blue rice paper, Naomi's internal drama reaches its climax of recognition and reversal: she is able to understand the puzzle of the past and reach a resolution for a new life in the future. Offering a resolution to all of her previous puzzles, the climactic scene also puts Naomi's experience in a new perspective and opens up the cosmic, universal dimensions of the novel. What is it in this letter that allows Naomi to come to terms with her past, her sense of abandonment and separation? The letter describes Nasane, the beautiful Japanese woman rushing through the living hell of Nagasaki during the radiation, trying to protect her cousin's little daughter — a child who, we hear, also happens to bear a striking resemblance to Naomi. Harking back to the allegorical methods of communal portrait, it is quite likely that Naomi recognizes herself both in the child and in the mother at the moment. More important, it becomes clear that in spite of Mother's unspeakable suffering, she is still able to care for her cousin's child, and think of her own children. Not allowing Naomi and Stephen to know about her illness and her death, she wants to spare them of her own agony, putting considerations of their welfare before her own need for them, even in the most harrowing moments of her anguish.

Although Mother is a human figure in the family drama, through the author's allegorical methods of characterization and through the sensitive handling of the religious symbols, in her death she emerges as a witness, a martyr, the representative of the sacred. Reaffirming her bond with her Mother allows Naomi to understand the legacy of an absolute, even transcendental love in the cosmos, which gives new vitality to the deadly, desiccated landscape of her soul. The power of the mother's posthumous message is enormous. Before receiving this message Naomi sees herself rootless, wounded, amputated. Looking at her mother's faded photograph, she also sees her image as lifeless, distant, indifferent.

The tree is a dead tree in the middle of the prairies. I sit on its roots still as a stone.

In my dreams a small child sits with a wound . . . a double wound. The child is forever unable to speak. I apply the thick bandage but nothing can soak up the seepage. I beg that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs may learn to dance. But you stay in the black and white photograph, smiling your *yasashi* smile.

Obsessed by her “double wound” Naomi withdraws into the hurt silence of woundedness. Benumbed, paralyzed by the past, she is unable to rejoice, to join in the celebratory dance of life.

Although the letter on the blue rice paper conveys a shocking, devastating message, it also brings about a healing change in Naomi: “The letters today are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves.” Recognizing that the “living waters” nurture the roots of the trees at the graves allows Naomi to see that the flow of love has power to overcome death: now she is getting ready to join the dance of life by completing the funerary dance she had been preoccupied with in the previous dreams. Having heard the mother’s message, Naomi has also come to accept her separation from her in the flesh and to understand oneness with her spiritually. As a result, the numbness of “woundedness” is over: the formerly “dead tree” has come alive, and so has the black and white photograph from her childhood. Addressing her mother with the fervour of a religious hymn, Naomi celebrates the power of regenerative love in her cosmos:

You stand on the streetcorner in Vancouver in a straight silky dress and a light black coat . . . Your leg is a tree trunk and I am branch and butterfly. I am joined to your limbs by the right of birth; child of your flesh, leaf of your bough . . .

Experiencing the flow of love over the roots leads her to another affirmation: the organic unity or oneness of life. It is the affirmation of the oneness between the roots, the trunk, the bough, and the branches which allows the formerly dead tree to come alive. It has overcome the stonelike silence of paralysis and woundedness, ready to respond to the “new word” in the formerly dead landscape. But what is the significance of the “new word” in this context? Several direct quotations and numerous allusions to the Bible have prepared us to see the conflagration of Nagasaki as the doomsday vision of the Apocalypse, the destruction of the world by the powers of evil. But according to the Biblical scenario, this vision of the Apocalypse is precedent to the vision of a New Heaven and a New Earth. Does the “new word” sought by the narrator point toward a transcendental reality on the cosmic level? And in terms of the political conundrum, after their years of wandering in the desert of hatred, are the Nisei going to find the “hidden manna,” or the fulfilment of their promised land in a multicultural Canadian democracy? Relating the same question to the personal psychological dimensions, is Naomi being “reborn” to a new life emotionally, sexually, spiritually?

In spite of the rich and consistent texture of the Biblical imagery, the plot does not fulfil our expectation of the vision of a "New Heaven and New Earth." Or rather, the last stage of this drama is not translated into human action. Once Naomi has achieved her illumination, she simply returns to the natural landscape where we had first met her, back to the coulee in Southern Alberta. The exclusive focus on the natural landscape in this most dramatic moment should draw our attention to some of the unique characteristics of Joy Kogawa's universe. In spite of the indebtedness to the Judaeo-Christian framework and the profusion of Biblical allusions, her world reveals profound connections with a fundamentally nature-centred, pantheistic tradition. The Buddhist tradition emphasizes the continuity between the dead and the living by affirming that death is also part of the nature cycle. Hence the finding of the physical location of the grave around the descendant's home in the community is a significant step in the ritual.⁶ There can be no new life, no creativity in the family until the repose of the dead has been assured, and the mourner cannot liberate himself from the "death taboo" before laying the dead in the earth with the proper ceremony to accompany this act.⁷ 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, offers resolution to her own rootlessness and homelessness. As a matter of fact, this spot inevitably becomes the emotional, spiritual centre for Naomi's quest, and therefore the appropriate setting for its resolution.

Coincidence of Buddhist and Christian symbols in the quest often present the effect of superimposition or double exposure. Although the "new name" on the tablet and the vitality of the living waters that feed the Tree of Life have their particular consistency significant in the Biblical drama of Apocalypse and resurrection, the same images also have their consistency in the Buddhist tradition. Here the Tree of Life becomes the family tree, and the concept of resurrection evokes Naomi's affirmation of renewal through the nature cycle, that is, through the continuity between ancestor and mourner in the family line: "Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight . . . we have turned and returned to your arms as you turn to earth and form the forest floor." As the wake for her dead becomes enriched by allusions to the Buddhist and the Biblical tradition, the images of tablets, water, stone, flower and fruit assume their multi-dimensional significance. The consistency of these archetypal symbols expresses beliefs shared by various ethnic and religious groups, as if to demonstrate that elusive ideal of multiculturalism that may offer the narrator hope for the political future. Harmony between these different contexts within the same narrative framework is also appropriate to Naomi's final resolution. 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.

Yet, in spite of the consistency of a spiritual, even a mystical sensibility, the

resolution in the landscape suggests that for the narrator resurrection and renewal are part of a human drama that has to be acted out exclusively in the here and now. In this soil, containing the bones of buffaloes, Indians, and early Canadian settlers Naomi has to lay her dead ones to “rest in [their] world of stone.” It is here, in the coulee of Southern Alberta that she had to find the “living word” leading to a flowering, a fruition, a harmonious dance in her spiritual landscape.

Structure — Resolution of the Puzzles

There is no doubt that Kogawa’s description of Naomi’s spiritual journey comes alive through natural symbols, and that without these symbols we would be at a loss for the significance of the human drama. In terms of this drama, Aunt Emily’s testament was the dead stone, containing a record of bitterness and anger against injustice. Mother’s message from the past is the vital insight which allows Naomi to come alive emotionally, to accept the transcendental reality of love which flows through the roots at the very gravesides. Once she received this message, the seed will flower with speech, and Naomi’s own testament will become the “white stone” with the “new name,” the “living word.” Ultimately, it is the message of love, which breaking the several seals of Aunt Emily’s documents, will “overcome” the conflagration of the Apocalypse.⁸ Once Naomi is able to “admit” this message in the innermost circle, the personal-psychological landscape, the currents of the vital emotion will inevitably overflow and bring to life the landscape in the second and third circles, that is, in the political and cosmic dimensions. The combination of the narrative devices — the three openings, the riddle in each, the interpenetration of the three landscapes, the task imposed on the reader to puzzle out nuances in the natural landscape as they become key elements in the human drama — results in a sophisticated game of hide and go seek, established at the start and resolved only at the end of the novel.

The author’s mastery of her craft is also demonstrated by the fact that all these dimensions of the puzzle are held together by the unity of a circular, indeed a concentric structure. The reader is often reminded of the narrator’s own image of the intricate weaving of the spider’s web, as characters shuttle back and forth between the various locations and the various time planes. Starting in August 1972, we move back to August 1954 (Chapter 1). Then, we go back and forth between August and September 1972 (that is, between the narrator’s last visit and Uncle’s death). We also take several journeys in time between 1933 and 1941, then between 1941 and 1951, as we follow the various stages in the tribulations of the Japanese Canadian family on its journey from Vancouver to Slocan and Southern Alberta. Then, just before the climactic scene in Chapter 37, we take a big leap; from the present in 1972 we move back to 1954, the arrival of the letter on the blue rice paper with the tragic news. From here we go even

further, back to the climactic scene in the novel, to Nagasaki in 1945. It is from this final and most significant leap in time and space that we have to return once more to the present, September 1972, the day of Uncle's funeral. We have come full circle.

Yet, side by side with these jumps back and forth in time, there is also narrative progress in a chronological, linear sequence. Advancing through the various stages in Naomi's life, we get closer and closer to its central mystery. Once this mystery has been revealed, however, the tight-knit spider's web might just as well dissolve. Her new understanding allows Naomi to extricate herself from the snare of her history. Central to the new message from the depth of the past is the revelation that at the hub of the wheel, at the centre of the web there is a force other than the meaningless destructiveness of evil.

In addition to and complementary to the spider's web is the ball of twine and string Obasan had collected from bits and pieces saved over the years. Powerful in her silence, Obasan is indeed in charge of "life's infinite details," as if the ball of string accumulated over the years would have somehow absorbed the wisdom and experience of those years themselves. As Naomi had anticipated, both the centerpiece and the end of the string — both the central secret and the key to its unravelling in the appropriate moment — have been in Obasan's hands all along. Struggling to overcome Obasan's silence, yet also inspired by its depth, Naomi has grappled with her task faithfully, unravelling her yarn in all its intricate patterns, yet also in full control of the tight-knit unity of its concentric, globe-within-globe structure. And although it has taken Naomi less than three days between Uncle's death and the gathering of the family for the funeral to accomplish her elaborate journey back and forth in time, within this interval she succeeded in solving a lifetime of accumulated puzzles. She has also made the silence speak: *Obasan* is a testimony to that hard-won miracle of creativity which alone has the power to turn silence into sound.

NOTES

¹ Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (1981; rpr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983). All references to the novel are from this edition.

² It is also significant for the framework of the narrative that all of Naomi's recollections (that is, the whole novel, except for the "Prelude" of the first chapter) take place in the interval between Uncle's death and funeral, and in the ancient Buddhist tradition this "interval between the encoffinment and the funeral is the most important period of the watching by the dead [a period now] generally passed in silence." See "Death and Disposal of the Dead (Japanese)," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1913), iv, p. 487.

That Naomi's grappling with her accumulated silence takes place in the framework of a wake opens up another interesting dimension of her struggle: her trial is to take a journey through silence, in silence, ultimately to liberate herself from silence.

- ³ According to Michiko Lambertson, "In the absence of her mother Naomi uses Obasan and Aunt Emily as windows on the female adult world." I also feel, however, that the contrast between Obasan and Aunt Emily goes beyond the narrator's attitude to the female world; insights from this contrast are fundamental to her definition of her own identity in terms of Oriental and Western cultural, political, and psychological attitudes. See Michiko Lambertson, "Obasan," *Canadian Woman Studies*, 4 (Winter 1982) p. 94.
- ⁴ It has been observed, for example, that "the syntax of her characters expresses fatalism." See Edith Milton, "Unnecessary Precautions," *The New York Times Book Review*, 15 September, 1982, p. 8.
- ⁵ Naomi's recurring references to the flower dance with the single long-stemmed rose should also alert us to a significant aspect of the ancient Buddhist ceremony in which "a single branch of Shikimi" or a single flower with a long stem is offered before the coffin when the preparation for the funeral is complete. The interrupted ceremony of the flower dance referred to in the dreams and in other parts of the novel is completed in the last chapter in the "wordless ballet" between "water and stone dancing," involving the "seed which flowers with speech" and the "wild roses and the tiny wildflowers that grow along the trickling stream." Seeing the landscape come alive, also means that Naomi herself may be able to join in the ceremonial dance and assume the potential for spiritual renewal for herself, for her people, and for all the survivors of war and persecution. See *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, p. 487.
- ⁶ When Naomi returns to Uncle's spot at the end, she is indeed old enough to understand the meaning of those annual visits. Harking back to the tradition of commemorating all the dead of the family at the same time, we may also assume that in the future she will include Uncle in her annual obsequies. See *Japanese Religion: A Survey* (Tokyo: Kadausha International for the Agency for Cultural Affairs, 1972) pp. 123, 134, 135.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ⁸ Although the context is undoubtedly Christian, several aspects of the sequence and a great deal of the spirit of Naomi's ritual of mourning are reminiscent of ancient Japanese tradition. There is no doubt that in the Biblical context of the universal drama "the white stone with the new name" anticipates the apocalypse followed by resurrection. Yet, at the same time, the tablet with the "new name" may also allude to ancient Buddhist or Japanese folk tradition in which it refers to the ritual drama in the family. In death the deceased receives a new name and will pass on his or her spirit to a newborn member of the family. To carry this reference even further, "in some Buddhist families there is a large family ihai [a wooden tablet] in which the names of all the members are inscribed . . . some Buddhist sects . . . speak about two kinds of posthumous names . . . [and] the second one is a kind of new name 'which no man knoweth saving the one that receiveth it.'" *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, p. 486.

