

of this strange prince and Forster's novel. Both language and theme in *Maurice* hark back to the Maharajah—and then point in surprising ways to Godbole.

“‘Goodness, wisdom, and beauty—that is what the Greeks worshipped, and that is what I want . . . a good, wise, and beautiful friend,’”¹⁰ the Maharajah explained to Ackerley. How reminiscent these sentiments are of those of the lonely, young homosexual, Maurice, who, as a boy, had a vague but haunting dream in which he “scarcely saw a face, scarcely heard a voice say, ‘That is your friend.’” The dream filled Maurice “with beauty and taught him tenderness,” and, not unlike the Maharajah, Maurice links these virtues with the Greeks. Was the friend “a Greek God . . . ?” he wonders. Later Maurice is “called out of dreams” by various male friends: “‘You must come,’” Maurice’s friends insist. “‘He did come.’”¹¹ Leaving aside the sexual overtones, we note how this language anticipates sections of *A Passage to India* in which Godbole also longs for a friend, though he calls to a god who never comes: “‘I say to [Shri Krishna], Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come.’”¹² In both Maurice and Godbole, we surely find echoes of the Maharajah’s loneliness and of his need for friendship—and perhaps even of his language itself. Dickinson jotted in his Indian journal that the Maharajah’s refrain “was always for Krishna to come—the ideal friend,”¹³ a phrase which again underscores the ties between the Maharajah and Forster’s fictional characters.

Yet differences surface. For the Maharajah, sex and religion went unblushingly hand-in-hand; he kept a troupe of Krishna dancers and relished the company of these young men. Forster, however, divided religion and sex down the middle as he drew on the Hindu prince for two of his novels. The Maharajah’s religious tendencies clearly influenced Forster’s characterization of Godbole. The Maharajah’s sexual tendencies, on the other hand, seem to have left an imprint on Maurice’s musings about his need for male friends. There may be more of Chhatarpur in Forster’s homosexual novel than critics have recognized.

Reclaiming A Canadian Heritage: Kogawa’s *Obasan*

B.A. ST. ANDREWS, *State University of New York*

The present state of Canadian letters might best be described as a state of elation. In the 1973 edition of the prestigious *Times Literary Supplement*, Ronald Sutherland declared this renaissance “Canada’s Elizabethan Age” and Margaret Atwood declared it “a literary expansion of Malthusian proportions.”¹ Chief among

¹⁰Ackerley, p. 27.

¹¹E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (New York: New American Library, 1971), pp. 22, 66, 72.

¹²E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924; rpt. New York: Harcourt, 1952), p. 80.

¹³G. Lowes Dickinson, *The Autobiography of G. Lowes Dickinson and Other Unpublished Writings*, ed. Dennis Proctor (London: Duckworth, 1973), p. 180.

¹Claude Bissell, “Politics and Literature in the 1960’s” in *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), III, p. 15.

these new voices in the Canadian literary renaissance is that of Joy Kogawa, who writes of the Japanese-Canadians; their story, in all its poignancy and power, is recorded in *Obasan*². *Obasan* voices not the affirming experience of self and others represented, for example, by the diverse Canadian literary renaissance itself, but the horrific experience of ostracism.

The history of one extended family, the Kato/Nakane clan, reflects the history of the Japanese-Canadian experience during and after the Second World War. Kogawa intertwines historical fact and often rhapsodic fiction to show how one little girl, Naomi Nakane, becomes aware of being an outsider, an enemy, an outcast in her homeland. A forbidding metaphor introduces *Obasan*: "The word is stone." Kogawa writes about what has been silenced; she writes with the meticulous purpose of one acutely aware that such stone must bloom: "Unless the stone burst with the telling, unless the seed flower with speech, there is in my life no living word" (Introduction). This introductory passage has the force and metaphorical intensity of Thomas Wolfe's opening to *Look Homeward, Angel*. Her introduction, like his, establishes the major themes: connections between the living and the dead, the tension between true and false memory, the tension between telling and silencing.

To find that "living word," the reluctant narrator, Naomi Nakane, must solve the riddles surrounding the dispersion and, in fact, destruction of her family. *Obasan* opens on August 9, 1972; the war is a disquieting memory for the thirty-six year old school teacher. Naomi Nakane returns to Alberta, a place of Japanese-Canadian exile, to bury her Uncle Isamu, who raised her and her brother Stephen after the dissolution of her immediate family. Her journey to bury the dead leads her into the treacherous territory of memory. She must move through this mine field as she attends Obasan Ayako, Uncle Sam's widow who embodies the old, Japanese virtue of silent forbearance. Naomi muses that "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" (p. 16). But Obasan Ayako guards the doors and tunnels; she wants the facts of the Japanese-Canadian experience, in general, and of the Kato-Nakane clan, in particular, kept silent.

Pitted against this tyrannical silence of Obasan Ayako stands the other Obasan, the thoroughly modern, thoroughly Canadian, not-to-be-silenced Aunt Emily. Naomi is the battleground upon which the war between silence and speech is waged. According to Aunt Emily, the edict to remain silent "kodomo no tame" (p. 21)—for the sake of the children—has justified for too long Naomi's ignorance about her mother's being caught in the atomic blast in Japan, about her musician father's death in a prison hospital, about her people's unwilling diaspora into the farthest reaches of the Canadian vastness.

The facts of history need some revision in the light of truth, according to Aunt Emily. Repeatedly, the notion that facts can be used to ostracize others, to distort truth, finds eloquent expression in *Obasan*. Naomi remembers the facts of her exile into Alberta: "Facts about evacuees in Alberta: the fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory" (p. 194). But Naomi must bear this and more. Aunt Emily, the surgeon of memory and history, operates skillfully and relentlessly. No longer can or should the three generations of Japanese-Canadians—the Issei, the Nisei, the Sansei—disappear into the future "as undemanding as dew" (p. 112). Aunt Emily adjures Naomi, in the words of the Old Testament, to "write the vision and make it plain" (p. 34).

²Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982). All references are to this edition. *Obasan* first published in Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1981.

From Aunt Emily, Naomi reluctantly accepts a box of facts: newspaper clippings, editorials, letters from exiled Nisei, headlines from World War II on the domestic front. She finds this Pandora's box filled with hatred and historical woes which offers, paradoxically, her only hope. This inclusion of precise documents and speeches—from Stanley Knowles's address opposing disenfranchisement of Japanese-Canadians to details of the Japanese Repatriation Program—underscores how completely the stone of silence has covered those victimized by racial misunderstandings. Kogawa presents the fictional Kato-Nakane clan to stand nobly against the official, often malicious social memory: history.

That history often silences the oppressed and glorifies its collective social memory is a stony fact, in and of itself. As the train full of Japanese-Canadians moves unwillingly into the Canadian interior, each disenfranchised citizen feels this stone of silence: "We are the silences that speak from stones. We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera, and every means of communication, a trainload of eyes covered in mud and spittle" (p. 111). Silenced by society, on the one hand, and by the Japanese tradition of forbearance on the other, Naomi Nakane becomes, nevertheless, the knower and the teller.

The narrator knows, too, that the treatment of the Japanese-Canadians parallels other injustices. In a beautiful passage, Naomi recalls walking with Uncle Isamu every year through the prairie grasses of Alberta. To an old man whose family has lived along the coast of British Columbia since 1893, these grasslands provide some small sense of flow: "Umi no yo," Uncle says, pointing to the grass. "It's like the sea" (p. 1). Resting near an old Indian buffalo jump, the niece thinks of Chief Sitting Bull, another man displaced by war and racial hatred (p. 2). Thus, Kogawa bridges other times and other cultures decimated by historical facts of difference, uniting the red and yellow-skinned peoples of Canada through their mutual love of the land, their silence, and their will to survive.

Naomi Nakane—through the lyricism and the unyielding strength of the writer Joy Kogawa—does triumph. The "living word" does shatter the stone of silence about the Japanese-Canadian experiences. The unspoken contention of *Obasan* addresses a concern wider than a single child or a clan or a culture group. The contention is this: to remain silent in the face of elaborate social injustice is to will some other people—at some inevitable future time and for equally compilable facts—to suffer a similar fate: dispersal, denigration, dehumanization. To those of us interested in revisionist history, in ethical literature, and in cultural psychology, *Obasan* proves to be mandatory reading.