

Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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In 1981 Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* appeared, the first novel on the internment of Canada's Japanese residents during the second world war. The political significance of the book's publication may be what strikes us first: the novel appeared at a time when the question of reparation to Japanese Canadians was beginning to receive exposure in the press; and since the newly elected Prime Minister Mulroney's promise of reparation in 1984, the issue has become "hard news" and receives continuing media attention.¹ But *Obasan's* political significance alone does not explain why the novel won the 1981 *Books in Canada* First Novel Award and the Canadian Authors' Association 1982 Book of the Year Award. Nor does it explain why the novel was successful enough to be reprinted in paperback by Penguin Books in 1983. *Obasan* is a moving and original novel, expressive of a sensibility that wishes to define, in relation to each other, Japanese and Canadian ways of seeing, and even to combine these divergent perceptions in an integrated and distinctive vision.

Writing of carpentry, Kogawa makes a distinction between Japanese and Western techniques that can serve to elucidate a fundamental difference between Japanese and Canadian people. The central character, Naomi, reports:

I can feel the outline of the plane with a wooden handle which he [Naomi's Grandfather Nakane] worked by pulling it towards him. There is a fundamental difference in Japanese workmanship—to pull with control rather than push with force.²

Japanese are restrained; Canadians, forceful. In the novel, this contrast is seen strikingly in the difference between the Issei—Canadian residents born or raised in Japan—and the Nisei—people of Japanese extraction born and raised in Canada. Naomi has two aunts, one whom she calls "Obasan" or "Aya

¹ Recent press reports show that the question of reparation is still far from settled and that the Government of Canada has only limited sympathy with the Japanese-Canadian plight.

² Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (1981; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1983) 24.

Obasan" and one whom she calls "Aunt Emily." "Obasan" is an Issei; "Aunt Emily," a Nisei. As the Japanese word for "aunt" is "obasan," each of the two may be termed an "obasan" of Naomi's. Each "obasan," in her own way, helps Naomi to survive the ordeal of internment; and, as the book's title intimates, the two "obasans" are, after Naomi, the most important characters in the novel.

Early in the novel, Kogawa draws a crucial distinction between her two aunts:

How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior. She's a crusader, a little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes. (32)

To "live in stone," Kogawa makes clear, is to live in silence—that is, to live without expressing in words one's deepest thoughts and feelings. When the persecution of Japanese Canadians begins in 1941, Obasan and her husband, Isamu or Uncle Sam, say nothing of it to Naomi, so that Naomi learns of the "danger" only through "whispers and frowns and too much gentleness" (73). When Obasan and Sam finally, in 1954, learn the fate of Naomi's mother (who, disfigured by the nuclear blast at Nagasaki in 1945, survived for several years after), they refuse to tell the children, Naomi and Stephen. When Obasan's husband dies in 1972, "the language of her grief is silence" (14). To Naomi, Obasan has become an icon of Japanese womanhood, "defined by her serving hands" (226). She lives "in a silent territory" (226); she "has turned to stone" (198).

To Naomi's Uncle Sam, Aunt Emily is "not like woman" (36). Evidently she is more aggressive than a woman should be. When the persecution of Japanese Canadians begins in 1941, Aunt Emily, along with other Nisei men and women, protests vigorously; and she continues to do so throughout the remainder of her life. When Aunt Emily learns the fate of her sister, Naomi's mother, she tells Obasan and Sam, then urges them to tell Naomi and Stephen. 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. "You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember

everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out!
Scream! Denial is gangrene." (49-50)

Naomi's first response, however, 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" (45).

Neither of Naomi's aunts provides her with a satisfactory model of womanly fulfilment. Entrusted with the care of two children by Naomi's mother (when she left for Japan, in September 1941, on a visit to her ailing grandmother), Obasan raises Naomi and Stephen with an unflinching tenderness that Naomi can never forget. But Obasan's marriage to Sam, though devoted, is empty of touch and tenderness. Obasan married Sam, she tells Naomi, to please her close friend, his mother; and, after conceiving two stillborn children, the couple evidently gave up sex. Though Naomi lived with them for years in a one-room shack, she has "never once seen them caressing" (6). When Naomi, as a child, asks her uncle if he and Obasan are "in love," he replies: "In ruv? What that?" (6). Aunt Emily's life, too, is devoid of romantic tenderness. Preoccupied with political activity, she has never married. Naomi has known her Aunt Emily only through infrequent visits from faraway Toronto. Obasan, on the other hand, she has known as a second mother; moreover, Obasan, like her mother (who was raised in Japan, though born in Canada), is an Issei, with values that remind Naomi of the mother whom Obasan replaced when Naomi was five. It is not surprising that, for a long time, Naomi rejects Emily's values in favor of Obasan's. This rejection, however, is accompanied by its own emotional emptiness. When her uncle dies in 1972, Naomi is thirty-six years old, unmarried, uncomfortable with her life, unhappy. She is tired of silence, ready for change.

The haunting, lyrical passage that prefaces the novel distinguishes between two kinds of silence: "There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak" (preceding 1). In the first scenes of the novel, which take place in 1972, before and just after the death of Naomi's Uncle Sam, Naomi is clearly a victim of the "silence that will not speak." Looking at the package of documents on the internment sent her by Aunt Emily, she sees Aunt Emily's years of writing protest letters as enervating and futile: "Like Cupid, [Aunt Emily] aimed for the heart. But the heart was not there" (40). But beneath Naomi's feeling that to speak of the past is futile lies a deeper feeling that to think of the past will be to drown in a "whirlpool": "If I linger in the longing [to remember her childhood], I am drawn into a whirlpool. I can only skirt the edges after all" (53). The novel is

presented as an autobiographical account by Naomi, the impetus for which comes from Naomi's conversion, after the death of her uncle, to Aunt Emily's view that silence is diseased and speech healthy. "'It matters to get the facts straight,' Aunt Emily said last May. . . . 'What's right is right. What's wrong is wrong. Health starts somewhere'" (183). The assembling of written materials, ostensibly done by Naomi, is an enterprise whose first aim is therapeutic. Naomi is presented as a person lost in the nightmare created by her silence; only by expressing her feelings can she reach understanding and emotional health. The novel mimics the mental process by which the narrator, Naomi, achieves a deeper understanding of her life; also, the novel implies that it is the writing of the novel that constitutes the therapeutic process by which greater understanding is achieved.

If the novel is therapeutic for Naomi (and, presumably, for Naomi's creator, the author, Kogawa), it is also potentially therapeutic for the community of Japanese Canadians. By maintaining silence, the Japanese Canadians have allowed the lies about them to remain uncontradicted. This is a point made to Naomi by Aunt Emily.

"None of us," [Aunt Emily] said, "escaped the naming. We were defined and identified by the way we were seen. A newspaper in B.C. headlined, 'They are a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada'" (118).

From Aunt Emily, Naomi takes over the aim of contradicting the popular-press versions of the Japanese internment. For example, beside a newspaper account of how "grinning and happy" the Japanese beet workers in Alberta were, she places her own agonized account of squalor and exhaustion. "'Grinning and happy' . . . ? That is one telling. It's not how it was" (197). But the Japanese Canadians are a part of the Canadian society which deprived them of their Canadian rights; what was done to them has important implications for the health of Canada as a whole. "What this country did to us, it did to itself," Aunt Emily says to Naomi (33). The therapy proposed by the book is not just for Japanese Canadians, but for all Canadians, as Canada's future health as a democracy depends, at least in part, on its recognition of (and reparation for) its past failings.

Obasan is Issei or first-generation; Aunt Emily is Nisei or second-generation; Naomi is something quite different—Sansei or third-generation Japanese Canadian. Obasan is fifty years old when the persecution begins in 1941, Emily twenty-five; each is fully grown, her values fully formed. But Naomi is a child of five,

not told what is happening, and too young to fully understand in any case: her perception of the persecution is bound to be quite different from that of either aunt. To say that Naomi converts from Obasan's view that silence is best to Aunt Emily's view that one has to speak out is, finally, to oversimplify. It is true that Naomi comes to an understanding that Aunt Emily's words of protest have not been futile: late in the novel she refers to them as "thin white wafers . . . symbols of communion" (182). Aunt Emily has worked with the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians, and it cannot be accidental that the book closes with an excerpt from the Memorandum by the Co-operative Committee that was instrumental in preventing the Government's planned deportation of all Japanese Canadians. But Naomi cannot speak in the same language as her Aunt Emily. To Aunt Emily, the persecution is "like a bad dream" (88); to Naomi it is like a nightmare from which there seems no waking, "a darkness that has crept into the house" (69), a pervading silence. The aim of the narrator—and, presumably, of her creator, Kogawa—is to combine speech and silence, or to articulate the silence: "The speech that frees comes forth from the amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence" (preceding 1). In the Buddhist tradition of Naomi's Grandfather Nakane, one "awakens" through apprehension of a something (or a nothing) that "cannot be put into words";³ in the Western tradition, God is "the Word,"⁴ and reality is apprehended through words. Naomi—like Kogawa—has roots in both traditions: the offspring of an Issei mother and a Nisei father, Naomi blends a Japanese attention to silence with a Western attention to words. Indeed, it is this blending that gives rise to the distinctive beauties and subtleties of *Obasan*.

Naomi's Aunt Emily seeks remedies for specific social evils: she looks in libraries and at conference agendas. Naomi seeks something much less easily defined, and her gaze is more wide-ranging. In one scene we see her as a fourteen-year-old sitting silently beside a swamp near her home in southern Alberta. "The longer I sit," she says, "the more I see" (204). Through a passive receptiveness (what Wordsworth would call a wise passiveness),⁵ she gathers into her eyes a myriad of small swamp creatures, including a frog with a broken leg that she takes home and nurses back to health and freedom. When she returns home with the frog, she learns that her father has just

³ Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957) 77.

⁴ See John 1:1

⁵ William Wordsworth: *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) 1: 355.

died; and the slow organic healing of the frog's leg acts as a metonym for the slow and painful process by which Naomi recovers, first, from her grief over her father's death and, second, from the years-long ordeal of persecution (to which her father's early death may be partly attributed). "To pull with control rather than push with force," says Naomi, is the Japanese way;⁶ and the healing of Naomi's spirit is, at first, not pushed by her will but pulled by powerful inner forces too deep to be named. The process is completed by an opposite and complementary urge, a change and activation of the will elicited by a "push" from her Aunt Emily.

Having willed herself to speak, Naomi wants to articulate something which her Aunt Emily only dimly perceives, the "silence that cannot speak." Such silence has many aspects; animals, being speechless, are locked in one kind of silence, and Naomi is intensely aware not only of animals, but of the kinship between their responses and ours. Describing chickens in the farmyard, Naomi seems, at the same time, to define the silent impulses that underlie the behaviour of the Japanese community when the persecution begins:

If anything goes overhead—a cloud, an airplane . . . —they all seem to be connected to one another like a string of Christmas tree lights. Their orange eyes are in unison, and each head is crooked at an angle watching the overshadowing death. (152-53)

One of the most important scenes in the novel again involves chickens. As a small child, Naomi puts some yellow chicks her parents have purchased into a cage with a white hen: to her horror, the hen starts pecking them to death. Such a scene can easily be allegorized: Canada is a sort of white "mother hen" that turned on some "yellow chicks," the Japanese residents who seemed to form a "Yellow Peril" (152). But to see the scene as simply racial allegory is to miss its deeper significance: the hen's behaviour suggests that in all animals there exists, alongside an impulse to nurture, an opposite impulse, to destroy. The xenophobia of white Canadians after Pearl Harbor can be attacked by typewritten letters; but Naomi becomes aware that this xenophobia is part of a problem much larger and deeper: nature, the nature that all creatures share, seems mixed.

⁶ Speaking of Taoism—but his words apply equally well to Buddhism—Alan W. Watts says: "The idea is not to reduce the human mind to a moronic vacuity, but to bring into play its innate and spontaneous intelligence by using it without forcing it" (Watts 21).

In *Obasan* the destructive behaviour of human beings far exceeds that of animals; and it appears not only in large events such as wars and political persecutions, but also in small, everyday events. After looking around the squalid hut in Slocan that his family will be forced to occupy during its internment, Naomi's brother, Stephen, walks outside and starts maiming butterflies with his crutch: "They're bad,' Stephen says . . . 'They eat holes in your clothes'" (123). Words, by enabling us to understand experience, seem part of what makes us superior to other animals; but words can separate us from experience by hiding from us our real impulses. The butterflies, though victims of Stephen's anger, are not its real cause, any more than Japanese Canadians are the real cause of white Canadians' anger after Pearl Harbor. The deepest impulses underlying cruelty are, perhaps, as unarticulated in humans as they are in animals: to articulate them is, thus, to articulate silence.

The most shocking instance of human cruelty to animals in *Obasan* is a "small" event, but one that helps us gain some insight into the nature of human cruelty. On the way to school in Slocan, two "tough" Japanese boys slit a chicken's throat, and four other Japanese boys watch as the animal's blood slowly drips: "'Got to make it suffer,'" says one of the two perpetrators (155). Stephen's slashing at the butterflies, like the white chicken's slashing at the yellow chicks, was a spontaneous effusion of rage; but the cruelty of the two "tough" boys is planned and deliberate. Stephen's act was beast-like; the two "tough" boys are all too human. We seem to see here the impulses that underlie the persecution of individuals and groups in human society; and the impulses seem to lie too deep to be eradicated by legislation. Like the boys in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, these two boys have plotted an unsophisticated sacrifice ritual. The ritual seems compensatory. By inflicting pain on the animal, the boys gain a sense of power and solidarity, and win momentary release from their own pain, inflicted by circumstance.

As this scene shows, words can be used to justify cruelty, but they can also be used to expose it: the power of words to mis-name does not cancel their power to name. A faith in the liberating power of words is something that Naomi comes to share with her Aunt Emily. Near the end of the book, after Stephen and Naomi have been told of how their mother was "broken" and disfigured by an atomic blast, the family's Anglican priest, Nakayama-sensei, says a prayer: "'That there is brokenness,' he says quietly. 'That this world is brokenness. But within broken-

ness is the unbreakable name. How the whole earth groans till Love returns” (240).

The “unbreakable name” is, of course, God, who in the Bible is identified with “the Word” and with Love.⁷ The novel implies that words springing from love lead to “the Word” and can share in its power to name experience accurately. But love is not merely a word and not merely Western. Naomi’s central insight into the nature of love she gains not from reading the Bible, but from looking at the Japanese ideograph for “love,” which contains “the root words ‘heart’ and ‘hand’ and ‘action’—love as hands and heart in action together” (228). Words are not enough by themselves; they must be “made flesh” by action (189).

Before Naomi learns this intellectually, she learns it experientially from a character who is neither “Western” nor “Eastern,” but somewhere between or outside these two categories. His name is Rough Lock Bill, and he seems to be the sole survivor of an Amerindian tribe that once lived in wilderness around Slocan, B.C. Rough Lock Bill is unlike any other character Naomi meets. Excluded from society more wholly than Naomi can ever be, he has a capacity to survive and thrive that is in itself exemplary. But he also teaches Naomi more specific lessons, in what he says and does. In June 1943, when Naomi meets Rough Lock Bill, she is a painfully quiet seven-year-old interned in Slocan. As she and a friend are playing by the lake, he walks up and not only speaks and writes his own name, but also demands that she speak and write hers. Naomi’s Issei elders have conditioned her to feel a stare as “an invasion and a reproach” (47); and from white Canadians she has experienced many stares that were just that. But Rough Lock Bill’s eyes, though they penetrate, do not invade or reproach. “Privacy” comes from the Latin *privare*, “to separate, deprive”: Naomi’s privacy is a state of deprivation, which Rough Lock Bill, by contrast to the white and the yellow people she has encountered, alters. He insists on communicating with her, which he does by telling her a story. But friendship entails more than words; and Rough Lock Bill confirms his friendship by deed when, a few minutes later, by disastrous chance, Naomi nearly drowns in the lake and Rough Lock Bill saves her. This physical rescue from death is a heroic enactment of the love for strangers that many people lack; but it is not his only rescue. Naomi has been “drowning” in her inner silences; and in “plunging” into her soul, Rough Lock has offered spiritual rescue in communion or fellowship.

⁷ See 1 John 4:8, 16.

Rough Lock's acts are equal and opposite to those of a white neighbor in Vancouver, Old Man Gower, who used to carry the four-year-old Naomi to a place of privacy and ask, "Would you like me to tell you a story?" (62). What then transpired may be simply summarized as sexual abuse, but its effects on Naomi are not simple. The abuse makes Naomi feel abject, afraid, utterly helpless—but also desirous: she starts to seek out Old Man Gower herself, although the secret pleasure he gives her causes her to feel excruciatingly isolated from her mother. She used to feel that her mother was "a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot"; now she feels she is "a parasite on her [mother's] body, no longer of her [mother's] mind" (64). Around this time her mother "disappears" (66), and to Naomi "the stillness of waiting for her to return" comes to feel like "a shadow which grows and surrounds me like air" (66). Describing the initial instance of sexual abuse, Naomi has written: "Is this where the terror begins?" (62). The book implies that it is. At the centre of Naomi's silences is the unarticulated feeling that her mother's disappearance is a terrible punishment for Naomi's "betrayal" of her mother's love. Naomi knows that Old Man Gower is an enemy, his attentions a cruel parody of the way love acts; but she feels her own complicity in his invasion of her body and cannot forgive herself—indeed, cannot even do what must precede such forgiveness: she cannot revive the memory and subject it to mature scrutiny. Instead she tries to forget what she cannot forget and so perpetuates its tyranny over her. Sexual abuse of children is "taboo": to speak of this part of her past, Naomi must break the silence that we are conditioned to impose on the "taboo." The shock of her Uncle Sam's death stimulates her to revive the memory of Old Man Gower; and the shock soon after of learning her mother's fate further revives her feelings from their chronic numbness. The facts of what happened to her mother, though terrifying, disperse the mist of her imaginings; she comes to see herself and her mother as victims of a shared delusion—the delusion that silence heals. Naomi's mother and her grandmother, she learns, "were unable to talk of all the things that happened. The horror would surely die sooner, they felt, if they refused to speak" (236). But Grandmother Sato breaks her silence to write to her husband in Toronto, while Naomi's mother "continued her vigil of silence" (236). Naomi concludes that the silence intended to "protect" (242) has maimed: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (243).

One of the deepest of the silences "that cannot speak" is the silence of those absent or dead. Yet throughout her life Naomi has experienced moments of silent communion with her mother, expressed by Kogawa in passages of exquisite lyric beauty. In

1945, not long after the bombing of Nagasaki, Naomi woke suddenly to feel: "Something has touched me but I do not know what it is . . . She is here. She is not here. She is reaching out to me with a touch deceptive as down" (167). Now, in 1972, after learning the truth of her mother's fate, she hears "the sigh of your remembered breath, a wordless word" (241). Once again she feels as if she is about to drown: "I sit on the raft begging for a tide to land me safely on the sand but you draw me to the white distance, skyward and away from this blood-drugged earth" (241). The way to safety is speech, and the "speech that frees" is the word of the "wordless word" that is God. Remembering both the small sins committed by herself and her mother and the terrible sins perpetrated by nations, she invokes a prayer spoken by the priest Nakayama-sensei years ago at her Grandmother Nakane's funeral in Slocan: "We are abandoned yet we are not abandoned. You are present in every hell. Teach us to see Love's presence in our abandonment. Teach us to forgive" (243).

Rough Lock Bill teaches Naomi through both what he does and what he says. What he says emphasizes the importance of words—he insists that both of them speak and write their names—and, in particular, of stories: "Never met a kid didn't like stories. Red skin, yellow skin, white skin, any skin" (145). The particular story he tells is of his tribe's dying off till one brave finds a new place to live and leads the tribe there. "'If you go slow,' [the brave] says [to the tribe], 'you can go. Slow can go. Slow can go' . . . We call it Slocan now. Real name is Slow-can-go" (146). Rough Lock's etymology may be facetious (many of the best tales are tall tales); but his faith in surviving adversity through "slow going" is adopted by Naomi, who, as she follows the bereaved Obasan to Obasan's attic in 1972, repeats, "'Slow can go'" (23). Rough Lock's tale probably derives from a tribal folktale of the kind that Stith Thompson classifies as *Sage* or "local legend";⁸ its basic movement, from identity to loss of identity to a renewal of identity, is one that Northrop Frye finds in all story.⁹ From Rough Lock Bill, Naomi learns the value of story: it can show a way to survive "brokenness"; it can unify experience by containing "brokenness" within a unified whole; it can unify a people by showing what all of them share. In writing the story of one woman's "brokenness" and her slow mending, Kogawa connects "heart to hand" and harnesses the power

⁸ *The Folktale* (New York: Dryden, 1951) 8.

⁹ This movement is implicit in the myth of the dying and reborn god that Frye sees as the archetype of all literature (*Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* [New York: Harbinger-Harcourt, 1963] 16).

of narrative to enact love and faith—a power much greater than that of discursive argument.

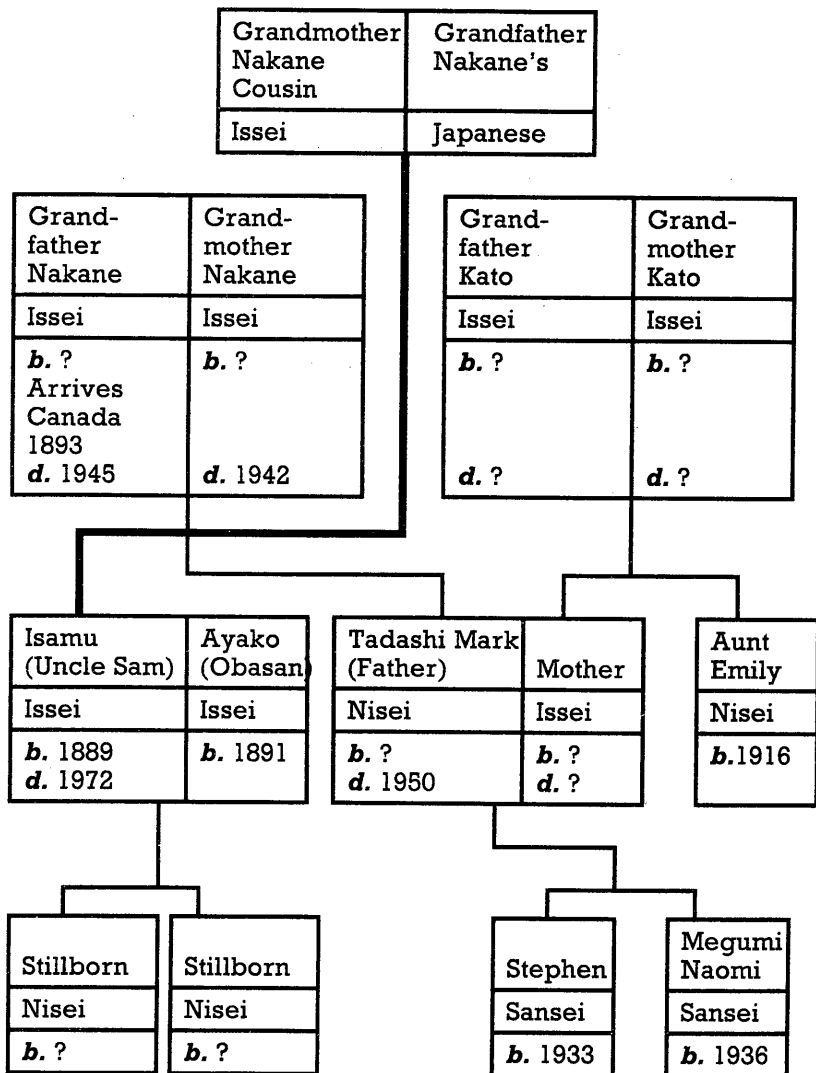
Kogawa began as a poet, publishing three volumes of lyric verse before her novel; in the novel there is an accession of imaginative power that is connected with her adoption of narrative. Often the poems express feelings that emerge from a narrative context that is only partly defined. In a sequence called "Poems for My Enemies" in her third collection, *Jericho Road*, it is not clear who the woman's enemies may be or why, for example, she at one point imagines (in a striking surrealistic image) that her washing machine contains "buckets of mud":

how can the wash get clean
if the water is not clear
if there are buckets of mud
in the washing machine.¹⁰

In *Obasan*, Naomi at one point finds a note on which her Aunt Emily has handwritten a quotation from the Book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament: "Write the vision and make it plain" (31). Reading the note, Naomi thinks: "She's the one with the vision The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey" (31-32). But in *Obasan* Kogawa has written the vision and made it plain: the book is an imaginative triumph over the forces that militate against expression of our inmost feelings.

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¹⁰ (Toronto: McClelland, 1977) 23.



Issei: Canadian residents who are born or raised in Japan

Nisei: Children of Issei who are born and raised in Canada

Sansei: Children of Nisei who are born and raised in Canada