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# Reconsidering the Past: History and Postmodernism in *Obasan*

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## Abstract

Those in power often use carefully constructed historical narratives to justify past injustices. Nevertheless, with the rise of postmodern literature, including historiographic metafiction, fiction authors have challenged traditional historicism while problematizing historical justifications for past injustices. Joy Kogawa uses postmodernist literary devices in her novel *Obasan*, presenting her novel as a work of historiographic metafiction. However, the political, social, and historical contexts in which Kogawa uses such devices reveal that *Obasan*'s historiographic metafictional qualities self-reflexively evoke a reconsideration of the official historical accounts that attempted to justify Japanese Canadian internment.

**Keywords:** History, historicism, historiographic metafiction, postmodernism, Japanese Canadian internment

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Exploring the nature of official versions of what happened to Japanese Canadians helps us to understand how *Obasan* evokes a reconsideration of those official versions. According to official historical narratives, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 led the Canadian government to perceive Japanese Canadians and anyone with Japanese ancestry living in Canada as military threats. Aya Fujiwara, an expert in the ethnic and immigration history of Canada, writes that Japanese Canadians living both inside and outside of the West Coast province were classified as "enemy alien[s]" under the War Measures Act, which was implemented against Japan in late 1941 following its attack on Pearl Harbor (65). The fear of Japanese – Canadian espionage was ostensibly the only motivation for Canada to take drastic measures against all people of Japanese ancestry living in Canada. Consequently, as historian Greg Robinson writes:

[T]wenty-two thousand Japanese Canadians from the West Coast of British Columbia were rounded up during the spring of 1942. They were then dispersed to a variety of destinations: road labor camps, sugar beet farms, or settlements in isolated mining villages. Their property was confiscated and sold by official decree, and they were forced to use the funds to pay for their own expenses. The Canadian government ultimately required the Japanese Canadians to choose between resettling outside the West and being deported to Japan, and it undertook the mass deportation of thousands of inmates as soon as the war was over.

However, the decision to intern, expel, and disperse Japanese Canadians did not arise out of a genuine concern for national security; instead, the oppression of Japanese Canadians was motivated by anti – Asian racism and discrimination, which existed long before World War II. Donald C. Goellnicht, professor of Cultural Studies, explains the official justification for the internment as well as the more credible reason:

Japanese Canadians constituted a military threat to Canada ... [but] the more

plausible reason was that white British Columbians had long perceived ... [Japanese Canadians] as a racial and economic threat and now seized the opportunity to get rid of this "threat." (288)

In fact, as historian Jordan Stanger-Ross points out, "scholars have traced white supremacy in British Columbia for almost a century prior to the internment of Japanese Canadians" (11). Evidently, the internment of Japanese Canadians was a blatant injustice born out of white supremacist racism, and far from being a so-called "necessary evil."

The internment of Japanese Canadians, and the experiences and trauma that ensued from it, is the most prevalent subject matter in Kogawa's novel. *Obasan* centers the past and present experiences of Naomi Nakane, the novel's narrator. When Naomi's uncle dies, she visits her widowed aunt, Obasan. During her visit, Naomi recounts her painful past growing up during World War II as a Japanese Canadian citizen experiencing racism and discrimination. With the help of documents, letters and photographs, Naomi shares her memories of her family members, specifically how they suffered from the racist laws that subjugated and oppressed them during and after World War II. Through Naomi's memories and experiences, the reader develops a new understanding of those official historical accounts of the internment of Japanese Canadians. Through Kogawa's use of postmodernist literary techniques, *Obasan* not only problematizes those official historical accounts but also presents the more plausible account behind the internment of Japanese Canadians. Therefore, *Obasan* is a postmodernist fiction, but one that presents a strong and compelling narrative that mirrors the reality of the internment of Japanese Canadians.

Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English – Canadian Fiction* defines "postmodernism" as consisting of

art forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive - in other words, art that is self-consciously art (or artifice), literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is

written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present. (1)

Postmodernism has this paradoxical nature, but as Hutcheon points out, the paradoxes of postmodernism, which are the “contradictory acts of establishing and then undercutting prevailing values and conventions,” serve “to provoke a questioning, a challenge of ‘what goes without saying’ in our culture” (3). Therefore, while postmodernism is art that self-reflexively comments on its own processes, it does so in such a way that challenges or raise questions about one’s culture. On the other hand, Hutcheon defines ‘historiographic metafiction’ as “fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities” (13). So, historiographic metafiction is a type of postmodernist fiction, but one that is grounded in historical, social, and political realities.

*Obasan* may seem like ordinary historical fiction that chronicles the internment of Japanese Canadians. However, *Obasan* exemplifies a work of historiographic metafiction since, like most works in the genre, it uses “the paratextual conventions of historiography to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations” (Hutcheon 122). Historiographic metafiction embodies the postmodernist message that history is non-linear; rather, it is a product of the historian's effort to piece together fragments of information into a coherent whole that claims to explain a historical event. The meaning behind many metaphors and similes in *Obasan* reflects this postmodernist critique of history. Furthermore, through Naomi narrating her memories and experiences, the reader gains multiple perspectives on the story of Obasan and her family. She also stumbles upon fragments of the past through old belongings, photographs, historical documents, and texts. Relying on multiple perspectives and fragmentary knowledge is a postmodernist literary approach that emphasizes history's non-linear and fragmentary nature. Therefore, *Obasan* self-reflexively points to how the official historical narrative surrounding the internment of Japanese Canadians was a matter of selection, interpretation, and personal bias. Thus, *Obasan*'s historiographic metafictional qualities self-

reflexively evoke a reconsideration of the historical accounts of these Canadians.

The metaphors in *Obasan* are grounded in postmodernist ideas that relate to Hutcheon’s idea of “historiographic metafiction.” Although the novel is dense with metaphors, Naomi narrates the first significant metaphorical passage: “[t]he language of grief is silence. [Obasan] has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful” (Kogawa 14). Kogawa augments this metaphor for grief in her short story version of *Obasan*, “Obasan,” by personifying Obasan's grief as a “highwayman” (Kogawa 310), roaming the channels of “her body with its dynamite and its weapons blowing up every moment of relief that tried to make its way down the road” (310). The passage personifies the violence and trauma of Obasan’s grief; it brings her grief to life in a physical way. Kogawa’s personifications bring Obasan's grief and plight to life while at the same time grounding her novel in historical, social, and political realities. Her metaphors are distinctive to works of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction as they evoke a re-examination of history through their self-reflexive commentary on the past. However, while the nature of Obasan’s grief does not explicitly offer a detailed historical account of the internment of Japanese Canadians, it does hint at a past tragedy that still troubles Obasan. Therefore, her metaphor presents an alternative historical account of how Canada wronged Japanese Canadians during World War II.

Similar to how the metaphors in *Obasan* construct an alternative historical account of the internment of Japanese Canadians, Kogawa’s similes also reflect how the novel’s historiographic metafictional structure critiques the official historical accounts surrounding the subjugation of Japanese Canadians during World War II. Naomi follows Obasan into the attic:

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. (26)

*Obasan* contains several references to spiders and spider webs, but in the above passage, the simile that compares the past to an old spider web reflects the postmodernist critique against recorded history or the act of historicizing; a spider's web can symbolize a type of complex construction that catches prey insects. In *Obasan*, the spider can be read as the historian, the web as the constructed or recorded history, and the prey insects as the readers of history or those who perceive themselves as a part of a constructed historical narrative. Hutcheon's claim that postmodernist theorists view "history as a construction" (15) reflects this passage in *Obasan*, explaining how *Obasan's* historiographic metafictional framework self-reflexively critiques traditional historicism. Like the metaphors in *Obasan*, Kogawa's similes do not convey a detailed historical account of the internment of Japanese Canadians; however, her critique of traditional historicism is, in a way, an invitation to readers to reconsider the official historical accounts that aimed to justify the internment of Japanese Canadians.

In a richer way than how both the metaphors and similes operate in *Obasan*, Kogawa's inclusion of multiple perspectives supports how her novel's historiographic metafictional structure challenges the official historical narratives that focused on justifying the internment of Japanese Canadians. During her brief stay with Obasan, Naomi shares her thoughts and memories of other family members as she explores her aunt's house:

The first of my grandparents to come to Canada, he arrived in 1893, wearing a western suit, round black hat, and platformed geta on his feet. ... The native Songhies of Esquimalt and many Japanese fisherman came to his boat-building shop on Saltspring Island, to barter and to buy. Grandfathered prospered. His cousin's widowed wife and her son, Isamu, joined him. (18)

Naomi's memories imply that her grandfather was an ordinary, hardworking Japanese man, who immigrated to Canada and assimilated into the dominant culture. Throughout the story, Naomi uses her memory to portray the story of her ordinary

Japanese Canadian family, which was at odds with the official historical narrative that viewed Japanese Canadians as enemy aliens posing a potential military threat. Margaret Turner argues,

by having [Naomi] ... work back through her memories to construct the story, Kogawa attacks both a particular false history - the official record of the Japanese Canadian internment and dispersal - and the discursive practices that have constructed it and, by implication, others. (90)

Naomi's thoughts and memories about her family provide an alternative perspective of the past, which reconstructs the official historical narrative that wrongfully demeans Japanese Canadians. The multiplicity of perspectives in *Obasan* exemplifies the postmodernist rejection of history as a coherent and linear account of the past, problematizing the traditional historical narratives surrounding Japanese Canadian internment victims. Therefore, Kogawa's inclusion of such perspectives to portray the history of Japanese Canadian citizens is one way in which her novel's historiographic metafictional qualities self-reflexively expose the limitations of historicism while at the same time presenting the more plausible historical account of how Japanese Canadians were ordinary citizens trying to assimilate into western culture. Thus, through Kogawa's inclusion of multiple perspectives, *Obasan's* historiographic metafictional framework further evokes a reconsideration of the historical narratives that wrongly vilify Japanese Canadians during World War II.

In addition to the multiple perspectives in Kogawa's novel, what makes *Obasan* a historiographic metafiction is Kogawa's inclusion of fragmented knowledge of the past. Fragmented knowledge of the past comes through sources that provide incomplete information about a historical event. During her stay with Obasan, Naomi observes and describes scenes from the photographs she encounters in her aunt's house. One day, Naomi observes,

The woman in the picture is frail and shy and the child is equally shy, unable to lift

her head. Only fragments relate me to them now, to this young woman, my mother, and me, her infant daughter. Fragments of fragments. Parts of a house. Segments of stories. (Kogawa 53)

Although photographs provide some concrete access to the past, they can never explain a historical event's entire story or context. In other words, a photograph is a fragment of history. Hutcheon notes that Michel Foucault and Robert Kroetsch have "argued that we might want to move from our usual notion of history to a new one of archaeology, which he claims, 'allows the fragmentary nature of the story ... against the coerced unity of traditional history'" (Hutcheon 16). *Obasan's* self-reflexive commentary on how history is fragmentary is another way in which *Obasan* is a work of historiographic metafiction.

Although Kogawa's use of fragmentation critiques the reliability of traditional historicism, her specific examples of textual fragmentations show the readers what past or historical account is under scrutiny. In *Obasan*, Naomi's paternal aunt, Emily, often encourages Naomi to learn about the internment of Japanese Canadians by giving her documents, letters, and other texts. Naomi picks up a folder of her uncle's documents, including "a mimeographed sheet signed by an RCMP superintendent, authorizing Uncle to leave a Registered Area by truck for Vernon where he was required to report to the local Registrar of Enemy Aliens, no later than the following day" (Kogawa 38). Like photographs and memories, texts and documents provide fragments of the past. However, such fragments are our only way to access the past because, as Hutcheon puts it,

we can know [the past] ... only through its documents, its traces in the present. If our knowledge of the past is something constructed (or even reconstructed), its meaning cannot be eternal and is certainly not unchangeable ... Historiographic metafiction questions the nature and validity of the entire human process of writing - of both history and fiction. (22)

Kogawa's inclusion of textual and non-textual fragmentary knowledge to tell the story of *Obasan* and her family imitates the historian's effort in selecting and piecing together fragments of information to explain a historical event. However, as Meredith L. Shoenuit indicates, "most postmodernists do not deny that certain historical events took place; instead, they question the language of various historical documents and the myths that have developed from history" (478). The textual fragmentations in *Obasan* critique the official historical accounts that mythologize Japanese Canadians as military threats during World War II. Regarding such textual fragmentations in *Obasan*, Corinne Bigot states, "the ... government was branding every person of Japanese origin as a potential threat or traitor. Branding or renaming meant that such a person would be subject to suspicion and be a victim of drastic measures." Evidently, the textual fragmentations in *Obasan* expose the arbitrary and racist measures taken against Japanese Canadians. Therefore, the use of fragmentation is yet another postmodernist literary technique that shows how *Obasan's* historiographic metafictional qualities self-reflexively evoke a reconsideration of the official historical accounts that wrongfully branded Japanese Canadians during World War II.

*Obasan* is historical fiction in the sense that it shares the memory and experiences of *Obasan*, her family, and Japanese Canadian internment victims. However, Kogawa's method of telling and re-telling *Obasan's* story – and the history of Japanese Canadians during and after World War II – reflects Hutcheon's idea of historiographic metafiction, because the novel embodies the postmodernist problem of history and historicism. The metaphors and similes in *Obasan*, along with the inclusion of multiple perspectives and fragmentations, work together as postmodernist literary devices that self-reflexively expose the limitations of traditional historicism. While Kogawa's choice of postmodernist literary devices problematizes traditional historicism, the literary context in which she uses such techniques reveals that *Obasan's* historiographic metafictional structure critiques the official historical accounts that wrongfully branded Japanese Canadians as traitors and enemy aliens. Thus, *Obasan's* historiographic

metafictional qualities self-reflexively invite readers to reconsider the traditional historical narratives surrounding the internment of Japanese Canadians.

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