

SYNOPSIS

Naomi Nakane, a third generation Japanese Canadian (Sansei) is, at 36, an unmarried, rather passive, school teacher in Cecil, Alberta. Uncle Sam and Obasan, her aunt, a very conventional but well-intentioned pair, have raised Naomi, and live in Granton, 150 miles away. Naomi visits them every month or so.

When Naomi's uncle dies in September, 1972, she rushes to Granton to assist her aunt and meet again the remnants of her family: Stephen, her brother, who has become an accomplished musician but who is ashamed of all things Japanese and therefore of himself as well; and Aunt Emily, a 50-year-old unmarried activist.

While awaiting their arrival, Obasan takes Naomi up to the attic and gives her a parcel Emily had sent at an earlier time, a dossier of official documents, family journals and letters. During the next three days, Naomi retraces her life from the present back to 1942, when the Canadian government ordered her and her family to leave their home in Vancouver. Naomi recalls her sexual abuse by a neighbour, Old Man Gower, when she was four. A short time later, Naomi's mother, on an ill-timed venture, left Canada in the company of her mother in order to take care of the great-grandmother in Japan.

Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, laws are passed expelling even the Nisei (second generation Japanese Canadians) from the "protected zone," the one hundred mile strip along the British Columbia coast. Many Japanese Canadians, including Grandpa and Grandma Nakane, are imprisoned at Hastings Park, on the Vancouver exhibition grounds. Subsequently they are shipped to road-work camps and concentration camps in the interior of the province. Others leave on their own.

Frantically Emily struggles against the chaos and the horrors of Hastings Park. At length the "inner family" of Obasan, Stephen and Naomi are sent directly to Slocan, British Columbia. The children's father, Mark, despite having a weakened lung, is sent to a camp, to work on a road gang. Emily and her father, a medical doctor, move to Toronto.

The house in Slocan is a run-down, two-room wooden hut, which the family shares with an elderly invalid. Naomi's grandparents are moved to New Denver, twenty miles away, and soon Grandma Nakane dies and is given a Buddhist cremation.

In 1943, Stephen and Naomi start school, a school where the staff and students are Japanese Canadians. Stephen spends time with his foot in a cast, put on to assist him with a limp he has acquired. The children continue to have many unpleasant experiences. They are harassed by the white boys in the community. The Nisei boys torture a

chicken to death. A kitten dies a slow death in an outhouse and Naomi is blamed. Rough Lock Bill, a recluse, rescues Naomi from drowning. Naomi gets shunned by her friend in the public bath house because they suspect she has tuberculosis, like her father.

Still, the family thrives, the community asserts itself, and in time gardens grow, crafts develop, stores open and life is eventually more tolerable. After the cessation of war, Naomi's father returns to the family for a brief visit during the time of the second uprooting when the Canadian government orders Japanese Canadians to move east of the Rockies or "return to Japan." They are encouraged to forget their ancestral heritage and assimilate into Anglo Saxon culture. Mark returns to the sanitarium in New Denver, British Columbia, and Obasan, Sam and the children move to Granton, Alberta, to a chicken coop on the Barkers' sugar-beet farm. Their hut is not insulated against winter cold and summer heat. In the meantime Grandpa Nakane has died and the family is unable to attend the funeral. Naomi's father also dies but Naomi is not explicitly told this.

In 1951, the family moves to a two bedroom, "real" house. Naomi wishes to know the fate of her mother. Aunt Emily suspects she has died but mysteriously refuses any further facts. Naomi cannot understand why her mother has never communicated with her children.

Eventually, Stephen and Aunt Emily arrive for Uncle Sam's funeral and finally the children learn the fate of their mother and Grandmother. With Obasan's permission, the Anglican clergyman, Sensei, reads aloud the letter from Naomi's grandmother, a letter that has been in Obasan's possession for eighteen years.

Grandma Kato's niece had a child in 1945 in Nagasaki and the niece and her husband were killed in the nuclear bombing. Grandma took care of the baby, who was dying of leukemia. Naomi's mother survived for a while, badly disfigured but was expected to die. The mother's final request was for her children not to know of these horrors.

Naomi finally understands the reasons for Uncle Sam's pilgrimages to the coulee; he was observing a ritual to honour her mother's memory, although in respect of her grandmother's (and mother's) wishes, he had to keep her death and its circumstances a secret from the children.

Hearing of these events, Naomi has completed her meditative journey back in time. She returns to the coulee, the site of her past pilgrimages.

BIOGRAPHY

Joy Kogawa, a Nisei — second generation Japanese Canadian — was born in Vancouver. She was born a year earlier than Naomi, in 1935. Kogawa — a novelist, poet, and activist — has devoted much of her energy to telling the

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Japanese-Canadian story and working with others finally to gain redress from the Canadian government for the internment of her family and twenty thousand other Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. As a result of her contributions she was made a Member of the Order of Canada.

Like Naomi, Kogawa lived and was educated in an internment camp in Slocan, British Columbia. In 1945 her family moved to Coaldale, Alberta. Kogawa went to various universities in Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta. She taught elementary school for a year and has since then devoted much time to writing, including working for Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and acting as writer-in-residence at the University of Ottawa. In her earlier writing days she composed poetry but recently she has produced two sequential novels, dramatizing the injustices suffered by the Japanese Canadians during and after the war. She has, also, finally returned to live in the city of her birth, although she maintains an address in Toronto as well.

CRITIC'S CORNER

Kogawa's earlier works, shorter prose pieces and poetry made use of detailed images, sometimes mythological, sometimes minimalist and dealt with both personal and political issues. Her first novel, *Obasan*, the only fictional account of the historical experience of the Japanese Canadians (except Kogawa's *Naomi's Road*, a children's version of the *Obasan* story) was very well received. Among its awards, it won the *Books in Canada* First Novel Award in 1981, and the Canadian Authors Association Book of the Year Award, and was translated and published in Japan (1983). It has since become a school reading list standard and is studied often in university and secondary school courses.

Obasan came out just as Canada was experiencing an explosion of multiculturalism, an explosion that expanded the canvas beyond Europe to include many people of different races, faiths, indeed, of different civilizations. The media played a large part in illuminating the unusual problems of these communities and many intellectual and political resources were applied to seeking solutions. *Obasan* with its overt portrayal of government racism often became a touchstone in these debates. For Japanese Canadians in particular, the emotional awakening of Naomi paralleled their growing national effectiveness and it played a role in the redress campaign that eventually obtained a formal government apology to Japanese Canadians and monetary compensation to survivors. When there were critics, they criticized the novel for being "too political." The same criticism was levelled at *Itsuka* (1992), the sequel, a very political novel and one lacking the richness and poetry of *Obasan*. *Itsuka* was seen to offer some interest as anecdotal sociology but little else. Fortunately it did not diminish the permanent achievement of *Obasan*.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To comprehend background events of World War II as they apply to Canadian society
2. To make an attempt at evaluating the root causes of racism and brutality
3. To evaluate the human need for comfort, achievement,

companionship and stability

4. To discuss the themes of loss, self-reliance and endurance
5. To characterize the use of the first person point-of-view, flashback, foreshadowing and symbolism
6. To recognize how a novelist uses characterization, language and setting to achieve her/his artistic and thematic purpose
7. To observe how children and adolescents cope, or fail to cope, with reality and to note the influence of adults upon them
8. To identify cultural differences in Japanese Canadians and other Canadians and to investigate contributions Japanese Canadians have made to Canadian society
9. To determine the importance of tradition in behaviour
10. To examine the values of Canadian society as they are revealed in *Obasan*
11. To accept and appreciate diversity and reject prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes and behaviours
12. To observe the transformation of the Canadian sense of self, a transition from the notion of the country as a bi-cultural society to a multicultural one
13. To understand the cause/effect relationship between character motivation and character action

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate Naomi's beliefs as girl and woman
2. To analyze key episodes and flashbacks which comprise the plot of *Obasan*
3. To examine critically the judgments that Aunt Emily makes about the handling of the Japanese Canadians during and after World War II and compare them to *Obasan's* attitudes
4. To observe how Naomi copes or fails to cope with the real world and to evaluate her early childhood experiences
5. To describe how Naomi is influenced by her family and associates
6. To summarize *Obasan's* plot by placing events in chronological order
7. To identify assumptions
8. To identify the coping skills of Japanese Canadians (children, the elderly, etc.) during and after World War II
9. To comprehend the importance of Nature (environment) in the lives of *Obasan's* characters
10. To connect the lives of *Obasan*, Naomi and Naomi's parents

MEANING STUDY

Below are sentences or thought units that have a particular meaning in the story. Explain the meaning each has for *Obasan*.

1. 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 forth from that 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. (Prologue)
(Like the novel itself, the images in the prologue

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progress through association rather than through any logical sequence or through the usual chronological order of a novel. The prologue supports Naomi's later argument against Aunt Emily's "words." Genuine, emotional experiences cannot and often will not "speak." They remain silences and words that describe them are "stone." *Obasan* is a book about silence. Naomi is unusually quiet and her relatives fear she may be mute. Her silence, however, is a deliberate response to a horrible world. Gradually she transforms this silence into poetic language.)

2. "Uncle," I whisper, "why do we come here every year?" (p. 4)

(Naomi does not know why she and her uncle make an annual pilgrimage to a coulee [a western American word for a deep gulch or ravine formed by rainstorms or melting snow, often, as in the case here, dry in summer]. Nor does she seem to know that August 9th is the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki. The question posed at the outset of the novel is not answered until the conclusion. In pursuit of this single question, Naomi will uncover the history not only of the Japanese internment but one of the most horrible acts of war in modern times, the nuclear destruction of her mother and other residents of Nagasaki. Neither the uncle nor *Obasan* answer the question "in words." At the end of the novel Naomi leaves *Obasan* in the silence of her grief to revisit the coulee she had visited year after year. As she does so, she slips on Aunt Emily's coat, perhaps a sign that she will enter Emily's wordy world, now that the story of her past has been made concrete.)

3. "Have you ever been in love, Miss Nakane?" Sigmund asks. "In love? Why do you suppose we use the preposition 'in' when we talk about love?" I ask evasively. "What does it mean to be 'in' something?" (p. 7)

(Ironically Sigmund hits on a problem that Naomi never does resolve. Naomi's journey through the book is a voyage of self-discovery, but the whole area of male-female relations (other than those involving family), of sexuality she carefully avoids. She is a repressed prude and shares this trait with Aunt Emily, also a spinster. She seems doubtful about her own sexuality and ethnic identity. Perhaps her abuse at the hands of Old Man Gower is to blame. One critic has suggested that because she is so preoccupied with memories of abjection, her spinsterhood is due to a lack of understanding of her abandonment by her mother, the absence of her father, and the dispersal of the extended family. Naomi's evasive reply to Sigmund, besides indicating a lack of comfort in the world of words, contains some interesting Freudian overtones.

4. One lives in sound, the other in stone. (p. 39)

(There are many contrasts in this novel, the absence and the presence of Naomi's mother being just one. In this quote we have the opposition between the wordiness of Aunt Emily and the silences of *Obasan* (and Naomi's mother). Emily regards language as the

means of restoring what has been taken from the Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. Her parcel contains, in language that Naomi cannot entirely understand, the answer to her question about why her mother did not return. *Obasan's* silences are the alternative to Emily's sounds. "*Obasan's* language remains deeply underground" (p. 39) and Naomi never entirely succeeds at deciphering her, perhaps because she may realize that to do so would force her to use Emily's "sounds." Naomi seems to work harder at deciphering *Obasan's* silences than Emily's words.)

5. It is a riddle, Stephen tells me. We are both the enemy and not the enemy. (p. 84)

(Stephen has learned in school that "Japs" are bad and they are to be sent away as a result. His father reminds him that they are Canadian. Stephen appreciates "riddles" and paradoxes. He recognizes the misconception that people often have: race and historical ties determine nationality. He devotes his life to becoming as close as possible to "not the enemy." He does not want to accept the fact that when it comes to defining nationality, how individuals or groups perceive themselves is as important as their historical ties or race. Commitment to Canada and pride in being Canadian are as important as length of residence, race, or cultural background. In Stephen's fate (and Naomi's) we see the results of racism — sometimes subtle and sometimes overt. Racism, prejudice and discrimination are harmful to everyone in society.)

6. "So he goes all the way back to where his people are,...and he says to them, 'If you go slow, you can go.' So off we go, these few here, some so weak they have to be carried. Took all of them together—how long? Months? A year? 'If you go slow,' he says, 'you can go....'" When my Grandad came, there was a whole tribe here...." "Right there was the chief's teepee. But last I saw—one old guy up past the mine—be dead now probably." (p. 173)

(*Rough Lock Bill*, the stereotypical Canadian backwoodsman, describes the extinction of an Indian tribe and their way of life, while he is imparting to Naomi the origins of Slocan. He treats their disappearance as though it were nothing more than an anecdote.)

7. But what good they do, I do not know — those little black typewriter words — rain words, cloud droppings. They do not touch us where we are planted here in Alberta, our roots clawing the sudden prairie air. The words are not made flesh. (p. 226)

(Aunt Emily's written language (like writing generally) tends to be one dimensional. Since it has not been "made flesh" it is unreal. It is just political talk. Emily's words have little effect; they do not result in transformations, either on a political level or on a spiritual one. Abstract language cannot warm us. Political language, Emily's language, is abstract. It lacks *Obasan's* dimensions. *Obasan* (and Naomi too) speaks through silences, through poetry which is rich and evocative. Naomi's own image of the tree being uprooted and

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involuntarily brought to Alberta with the roots in the air is an example of words made into flesh. Since Naomi has genuinely experienced the full impact of the internment and dispersal, she is able to render in personal detail a historical period which Emily can present — largely — only in moral abstractions. Naomi's awareness of the suggestive power of words, which makes possible the poetry in the novel, provides the motivation for her resistance to Emily and the purely political world her writing implies. Emily's language suggests a lack of sensitivity to the subjective self.)

8. The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn't enough, is it? It's your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the anaesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over Aunt Em? (p. 232)

(This is an often repeated theme, this time using the image in which Aunt Emily [the surgeon] "operates" on Naomi to remove the evil "growth" planted there by white Canadians in her childhood. (Mr. Gower's symbolic rape?) The growth has led to Naomi's guilt and silence and can only be removed by having her re-experience her history—through the guidance of Emily. At the end of the novel "the operation" proves to be successful and "life" is restored.)

9. 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, the slugs and slime and bogs and twigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. (p. 271)

(In this angry outburst, as she does so often, Naomi points out the meanness of spirit that to her is a national characteristic of Canada. As a result of a stubborn failure of imagination, Naomi and Stephen must feel shame for their own racial origins and identify themselves instead with a country full of people not at home with each other and showing no compassion towards the ethnic backgrounds of others. Later, after recovering her past, Naomi seems to move towards a warmer feeling for her country.)

10. Perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here. (p. 292)

(This is one of Joy Kogawa's own favourite sentiments from the book. Although Naomi is thinking of her mother the line also suggests her views of the presence of the Divine. In subsequent interviews Kogawa has given her view about "divine abandonment" and the death of God. God has abandoned divine power into the human condition, leaving us therefore, not to abandon one another, but instead to reach out to one another. Nakayama-sensei prays at the reading of the letter: "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." (p. 243) This lesson is exemplified by Obasan's actions and attitudes.)

11. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves. (p. 292)

(Again we have the tree image that recurs throughout the novel. A Canadian maple has been planted on Naomi's mother's grave in Japan. Naomi, having just learned of her mother's fate, addresses her as if in prayer. She recognizes that she herself is the branch which has originated from her mother, who is the tree trunk, and she recognizes that, although a child needs the physical presence of a mother or loved one, a mature person can remember and know and love — without the presence of flesh. Even though the physical body has gone, love still flows. Letters [and words] are "bones only." What is important is spirit and feeling. Only now does Naomi realize that her mother's appearances to her in dreams [p. 199], in spirit are as meaningful as a physical return might have been; her mother is transformed from a dead tree into part of a living forest. This new vision of love survives and transcends the death of her mother and becomes the moving force behind her acceptance of the politics advocated by Emily.)

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the novel.

Literal Level

1. In immigrant communities the first three generations of a family differ in their adaptations to their country. What are the names given to Japanese Canadian generations? Who represents whom in this novel? Briefly state the significance of each generation.

(The Issei are the immigrants from Japan and in this novel they are represented by Naomi's grandparents, Obasan and Uncle Isamu. The Nisei are first generation, born in Canada and are represented by Emily, Naomi's mother and father. The Sansei are children of Nisei and this group is represented by Stephen and Naomi, although they have been raised in the main by Issei, making them closer to the Nisei. [Naomi's mother too had a Japanese upbringing provided by Grandma Kato but her father was a complete Nisei.] The Issei tended to adjust to the new land without changing their culture or the old way of life. In language they were still part of the culture of their birth. The Nisei worked more to identify with the country of their birth rather than with their heritage. They were not comfortable with Japanese and were often caught between cultures. Because Japan was an enemy of Canada [World War II], the Nisei and above all the Sansei were ashamed of their race, its culture and its politics. Emily, the Nisei, attempts to bring the generations together and to help Naomi get back to her Japanese roots and to understand Japanese/Canadian history. This involves forcing Naomi to recognize that she was blameless and that the Canadian government's treatment of Japanese Canadians was unjust.)

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2. Indicate the more obvious symbols and prevailing images, offering interpretations of each.

(Naomi identifies with trees and at the novel's end she discovers her mother has had a maple [symbol of Canada?] planted on her grave. Trees suggest creature things. Children are branches from the main trunk of parents, etc.)

- Chickens appear frequently. The family moves into a "chicken coop house" in Granton. One scene involves yellow chicks, being killed by a mother hen and being cowardly like Naomi and like Chicken Little. They will eventually grow large and white and cannibalistic like the hen that kills her own, an act foreshadowing genocide. Of course yellow suggests not only cowardliness but a racial colour.
- A kitten is thrown into an outhouse, symbolic of aimless and perverse experimentation with power, suggesting the devastation of Nagasaki and the book's conclusion.
- The "stone" image dominates the book from Preface to end. The stone suggests rock, foundation, the indestructible, the spiritual. It is connected with Obasan and Uncle Sam. Stone is silent and endures; like Obasan, stone can speak if you listen. You listen by watching.
- The string saved by Obasan ties together Emily Kato's papers and is the thread of their life. Obasan is continually creating a twine ball [p. 44] from bits of string. This suggests the frugality and orderliness of her life. Other images or symbols include the sea, dreams, silence, etc.)

3. What are some of the religious elements in the novel?
(Obasan is based on a Judeo-Christian framework and there are a profusion of Biblical quotations and allusions. Many religions, Christianity in particular, state that human suffering is redemptive. Naomi achieves a kind of salvation through her experiences of historical evil. Emily's documents serve as a kind of "communion," in the Christian sense. There are, however, many prayers to a God who is shown to be powerless in changing the course of events. In addition there is a suggestion of Buddhism, the main religion in Japan, a religion which emphasizes the continuity between the dead and the living by affirming that death is also part of the life cycle. Grandma Nakane's Buddhist cremation suggests a ritualistic cleaning, a purification and a return to the "seed" state.)

Interpretive Level

4. Why has Obasan been called a poetic novel?
(The "poetry" in the novel is in contrast to the expository [and rather lifeless] prose — strident and polemical — of Emily's dossier. The novel involves the central metaphor of a journey and its nature is symbolic and imagistic.)
5. In your opinion, what is the main theme of Obasan?
(The role of the family, or culture, or politics on the life of a girl? That horrible paradox that injustice provokes more guilt in its victims than in its perpetrators? Being

punished makes innocents such as Stephen and Naomi feel ashamed of who they are.)

6. How does Obasan fit into a Canadian literary tradition?
(In the 1990s we have moved into a post cold war world in which ideologies such as Marxism and Communism are irrelevant and where the term "Third World" is becoming meaningless. Literature reflects this; we are seeing a clash of civilizations where peoples with one history, language, culture, tradition and religion are dwelling on the ways they differ from others. We are seeing intra-civilizational conflicts, conflicts that are visible in much of modern Canadian writing. Some of it is "revenge literature", recreating ethnic, religious and cultural wars. Time magazine labelled a brand of Canadian literature as "world fiction," The English language is being enriched and transformed by writers such as Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, Neil Bissoondath, Cecil Foster, Olive Senior, Moyez Vassanji. They depicted other civilizations in new voices. Joy Kogawa's Obasan, depicting as it does the spiritual journey of a Japanese Canadian, using a unique voice and a Japanese Canadian background, stressing not so much plot but the language of nuance, fits this new Canadian writing, writing of immigrants or near immigrants sensitized to the pulls and pushes of different cultures' energy fields. Her book is reminiscent of Japanese writing (and film) and it depicts Japanese family life in a Canadian context.)
7. The Indian-born U.S. novelist, Bharati Mukherjee has written, "Ancestral habits of mind can be constricting; they also confer one's individuality." How has her Japanese ancestry shaped the "individuality" of Naomi?
(Naomi has retained the Japanese language she learned as a child [Stephen has not] but she is basically uncomfortable with the mixture. She remembers her mother as being the epitome of "Japanese motherhood," characterized by a code which puts precedence of deeds over words and the decorum created by the appropriate gesture and subtle intonation. As a child, Naomi's needs were honoured and supplied before they were even asked for. Deeds were performed without receiving praise or blame. Obasan, too, fits this Japanese stereotype of "inscrutability" and Naomi must work to decipher her acts, silences and nuances. For example, Obasan wordlessly offers food to a woman and child on a train. Naomi sees and tries to understand. Obasan refuses to blame others for her fate; Naomi does not do so either. This behaviour is defined as "Japanese" and is essentially non-verbal. Family life is governed by a code of behaviour emphasizing self-restraint and consideration of others. One must never burden people with one's problems. Things internal should not be exposed verbally.)
8. What is the function of Stephen?
(Stephen suffers from self-loathing in a world of anti-Japanese racism. As a result he focuses on "whiteness" (in all its various forms) as a desirable goal and rejects Japanese culture entirely. He suffers from a

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mindset of seeking "white" approval for everything he does. Because he feels his people were punished for wrong doings, he feels he must have been wrong in some way too. Filled with a sense of unwarranted guilt and shame, he abdicates from any involvement with family and community. Prejudices about a group, in this case "the Japs," produce low self-esteem in its members and lead them to accept negative views of themselves. Whereas Naomi escapes her world through story, Stephen escapes through music. He uses self-denigration, showing signs of alienation from himself and his cultural group. Thus he reinforces false views hurting both the Japanese community and Canadian society as a whole. He represents certain members of highly assimilated visible minorities, suffering from a colonized mind-set.)

9. What is the significance of the encounter between the Barkers and Obasan during Obasan's period of mourning?

(This scene shows the contrast between Obasan and the Barkers, each representing different cultures. It exemplifies the biggest problem of multiculturalism. We are all different and often don't really understand each other and are uncomfortable with each other. Mr. Barker, though well-intentioned enough to pay his respects, is inadvertently racist. He is condescending, even suggesting Obasan should go to an all white "old folk's home." He speaks loudly, imitating Obasan's broken English. ["You people very clever."] He uses surnames only. He refers to "Our Japanese." Naomi is offended and Obasan is the sympathetic character. She doesn't respond except with polite silence.)

Critical Level

10. Are the opening and conclusion effective?

(A novel usually opens with interest-creating devices, introducing readers to provocative character(s) or a page-turning plot. Theme and mood are established. Kogawa works at establishing these last two. In fact, she seems to have three openings. The first is the motto of the book, a quotation from the Book of Revelations, introducing the mythical symbols of renewal Naomi will be in search of. The second introduces the theme of silence in a description of Naomi's soul filled with various forms of stillness which will eventually produce the magic of life: the seed will flower into speech. Finally we meet the narrative of Chapter 1 and are introduced to the realistic Canadian landscape. This setting represents what the other two openings have also presented — but this time more specifically. The question as to why Naomi and her Uncle come to this location is posed and the rest of the book seeks to provide the answer. The opening is thus most effective although it may be too elusive for some readers. After being introduced to Naomi's spiritual (and political) journey we move through the novel to a conclusion in which Naomi returns to the coulee from Chapter 1 with new understanding and insights breaking the stone of silence that has virtually entombed her as a child and a young woman. The first and last chapters are like two halves of a circle.)

11. Is the title *Obasan* more effective than Naomi, for example, might have been? Give and defend a possible subtitle for the novel.

*(Kogawa has said that she called her book *Obasan* because *Obasan* is totally silent. *Obasan* is a carefully drawn portrait of the oppressed and is a luminously silent response to *Aunt Emily*. She endows the novel with a secure rootedness. "She is every old woman in every hamlet in the world...She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life's infinite details."*

*[pp. 18-19] Naomi, as she herself admits [and Aunt Emily taunts], in the novel's sequel, *Itsuka*, is not a particularly interesting person: She is a "learner" and *Obasan* [Japanese for "aunt"] is her key teacher. Possible sub-titles might be: *Departures, Roots, The Sound and the Stone.*)*

Creative Level

12. *Obasan* shows us the Buddhist funeral of Naomi's grandmother and the book's central chronology involves the three days after the death of Naomi's uncle, concluding with his Christian funeral. Create a "model" mourning period and a funeral for an imaginary (or real) loved one, reflecting your beliefs in God or/and the meaning of life. You might base it entirely on your religious tradition, modify this, or make it an entirely personal ceremony. What use would you make of flowers? Cemetery plot? Obituary? Gravestone inscription?
13. Write three letters of sympathy: one to Obasan on the death of her husband, one to Grandpa Nakane on the death of his wife, and one to Naomi who has just found out the fate of her mother.
14. Which society works best — one with a cultural mosaic or a cultural melting pot? What light does *Obasan* shed on this question?
*(Robert Hughes, critic and historian, in his *The Culture of Complaint*, has defined multiculturalism as the belief "that people with different roots can co-exist, that they can learn to read the image banks of others, that they can and should look across the frontiers of race, language, gender and age without prejudice or illusion....It proposes — modestly enough — that some of the most interesting things in history and culture happen at the interface between cultures. It wants to study border situations, not only because they are fascinating in themselves, but because understanding them brings with it a little hope for the world.")*

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Math

1. Change miles, feet and inches as used in *Obasan* to conform to the metric system.
2. Based on this novel, prepare a question (and answer) which an obsessive math student might appreciate.

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Social Studies and History

1. Draw a map of British Columbia and Alberta, indicating those places of internment mentioned in *Obasan*. In addition, sketch town plans of Slocan and Granton, indicating the Nakane dwellings on each.
2. Define the word "Canadian" as it might be defined today and compare that to a definition from previous historical eras.
3. Write a brief history of racism in this country.
4. Provide photographs (or sketches) to illustrate the geography indicated in this novel.
5. Which Japanese customs or attitudes are presented in *Obasan*?
6. Indicate the differences between a Buddhist, Christian (and any traditional) funeral rite.

Psychology

1. Japanese Canadians were deprived of many of their individual freedoms. List these deprivations and show the reactions of the characters involved. Support your response with evidence drawn from the field of psychology.
2. Research the colour yellow and describe the historical and psychological effects of this colour. Indicate the uses Kogawa has made of it (and other colours as well) and discuss the validity of it as a symbol.
3. What are the possible psychological results of the sexual abuse by Old Man Gower on Naomi? How can a child be protected from such encounters?
4. Comment on the statement "Children can be such savages."

Cinema/Media

1. Compare and contrast this book to a film handling a similar theme. For example: *Schindler's List*, *Empire of the Sun*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Family*, *Avalon*, *Enemy Alien* (National Film Board), *No More Hiroshima* (National Film Board).
2. Prepare a media campaign for building support for multi-culturalism. Create posters, newspaper ads, T.V. commercials, etc.
3. Write a short film script opposing racism.
4. Select a magazine from the 1940s (e.g. *MacLeans*) and describe the general impressions it creates on you, making generalizations about its unique features, etc.

Music

1. Compose a ballad based on the life of Naomi and set it to music. The music need not be original.

2. Create an audiotape of the music that Stephen might perform at an imaginary concert. In a written supplement indicate reasons for your choices.
3. Compare and contrast the Japanese music tradition to the western music tradition. Create an audiotape of examples to support your writing.
4. "Music is for Stephen what story is for Naomi." What powers does music have, according to *Obasan*?

Language Arts

1. Make a list of images used in the novel under the headings of sound, touch, sight, smell and taste; state the effects suggested.
2. List the symbols Kogawa has used and indicate their suggested meanings.
3. Naomi is affected by the stories she reads or hears. What symbolism might be suggested by two such fairy tales as "Goldilocks" and "Chicken Little"? Are fairy tales harmful or useful tools for a child's education?
4. In alphabetic order, list and give the meanings to the Japanese words used in *Obasan*.
5. Define euphemism and create a list from this novel.

Art

1. Do illustrations (or choose photographs) to illustrate key scenes, images or symbols from the novel.
2. Create an exhibit consisting of historical photos and other artifacts (newspaper clippings, models, pamphlets, etc.) to illustrate the plight of Japanese Canadians during World War II.
3. Do a drawing of the King-bird, emphasizing his mythological powers.
4. Create a new cover for *Obasan*.
5. Create a collage of pictures depicting Japanese culture.

Health/Science

1. What is T.B.? What indications are there that Naomi's father suffered from it? Why does this strain of the disease not pose the risks now that it did during the early sections of this novel?
2. Write an account of the nuclear bombing of Japan indicating in layman's terms the construction of an atom bomb and its effects upon people.
3. What causes dreams? Give an account of Naomi's dreams, indicating images common to all. Is there a recurrent pattern? Analyze them.

OBASAN

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Making as much use of *Obasan* as possible, write out positive responses to the following misconceptions:
 - (a) Antiracist and ethnocultural-equity education is important only in large urban areas or in communities that are visibly diverse.
 - (b) Race and/or historical ties determine whether one is truly Canadian or not.
 - (c) There is no longer racial discrimination in this country.
 - (d) A policy of multiculturalism erodes pride in one's country.
 - (e) English must be spoken at home if the child is going to acquire the second language and do well at school.
 - (f) Newcomers should be grateful for our generosity. If they don't like the way we do things, they should "go back home."
 - (g) The characteristics of any member of a group can be taken to represent the characteristics of that group.
 - (h) Ethnic or racial humour is okay.
 - (i) Self-denigration (in which one mocks one's own cultural, racial or religious group) is harmless.
2. Joy Kogawa much admires the writings of Rosemary Ruether. In *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity* Ruether writes: "Each of us must discover for ourselves the secret key to divine abandonment: that God has abandoned divine power into the human condition completely and utterly that we might not abandon one another." What light does this quotation shed on *Obasan*?
3. "People do strange things in times of stress." Comment on this statement in the light of at least *three* incongruous incidents you found in *Obasan*.
4. Choose an incident which you feel was most pathetic. Define pathos (roots, origins, etc.) and then explain the effectiveness of your chosen example.

ALTERNATIVES FOR STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

1. Find out what Canada's present immigration policy is and either justify it or an attack it intelligently.
2. *Obasan* deals with overt and inadvertent racism. Show that this is so.
3. Write an original critical analysis of one of the following, using *Obasan* as much as possible:
 - (a) race relations
 - (b) organized patriotism
 - (c) nationalism
 - (d) Christian humanism
4. Make an analysis of the biblical references and indicate how they add to the themes of the novel.
5. Write a response to one of the following:
 - (a) the Mr. Gower/Naomi episodes

- (b) the death of the kitten
- (c) Naomi's encounter with Rough Lock
- (d) the mother hen/chicks incident

6. Tape your parents telling you the story of your birth (or adoption) and early childhood; write a response to your past, in the present tense. What are the origins of your names and what are your feelings about them?

OTHER BOOKS BY JOY KOGAWA

Poetry

- The Splintered Moon* (1967)
A Choice of Dreams (1974)
Jericho Road (1977)
Woman in the Woods (1985)

Fiction

- Naomi's Road* (1986)
Itsuka (1992)

RELATED READING

- Ken Adachi's *The Enemy That Never Was*
Ian Buruma's *The Wages of Guilt*
Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice*
Neil Bissoondath's *A Casual Brutality*
John Borovilos' *Breaking Through: A Canadian Literary Mosaic*
Barry Broadfoot's *Years of Sorrow, Years of Shame*
Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*
Maggie Goh and Craig Stephenson's (ed.) *Between Worlds: A Collection of Writings on the Canadian Immigrant Experience*
David Holdberg's *The Nature of Prejudice*
John Hersey's *Hiroshima*
Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*
Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*
Jack Kuper's *Child of the Holocaust*
Ann Gomer Sunahara's *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War*
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*
Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*
Cornel West's *Race Matters*
Elie Wiesel's *Night*

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- Merivale, Pat. "Framed Voices: The Polyphonic Elegies of Herbert and Kogawa." *Canadian Literature* 116 (1988), pp. 68-82.
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Williamson, Janice. *Sounding Differences: Conversations*
with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers. University of
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OBASAN

VOCABULARY TEST

Match each word in **bold** with its definition listed below. Write the letter of the definition in the space provided.

- ____ 1. She learned it well, its **idioms**, its nuances.
- ____ 2. Questions from all these papers...are unnecessary in the delicate **ecology** of this numb day.
- ____ 3. I am wearing a wine-coloured **dirndl** skirt.
- ____ 4. I am tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with **decorum**, unable to shout or sing or dance...
- ____ 5. Once I came across two **ideographs** for the word "love."
- ____ 6. Must be something in the blood. A crone-prone **syndrome**.
- ____ 7. ...it's too covered with cultural **accretions** for comfort.
- ____ 8. Like the grass, I search the earth and the sky with a thin but **persistent** thirst.
- ____ 9. Squatting here with the putty knife in her hand, she is every old woman in every **hamlet** in the world.
- ____ 10. The man is taller, thinner and precise — a British **martinet**.
- ____ 11. ...but their property wasn't **liquidated** as ours was.
- ____ 12. When war struck this country, when neither pride nor **belligerence** nor grief had availed us anything....I clung desperately to those immortal lines.
- ____ 13. Her hand moves on the table like an **electrocardiograph** needle, delicate and unreadable.
- ____ 14. If you cut any of it off you're an **amputee**.
- ____ 15. That country is totally **totalitarian**.
- ____ 16. ...the doll is no longer **pristine** and decorative.
- ____ 17. The **coulee** is so still right now that if a match were to be lit, the flame would not waver.
- ____ 18. Almighty and ever living God, who by Thy holy Apostle has taught us to make prayers and **supplications**, and to give thanks for all men.
- ____ 19. In Toronto there were the Jews who opened their business to employ the **Nisei**.
- ____ 20. There are constables at the doors — "to prevent further **propagation** of the species," it said in the newspaper.

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| a. petitions | i. additions | q. military disciplinarian |
| b. good old | j. continuous | r. character symbolizing idea |
| c. multiplication | k. full-length | s. exchanged for money |
| d. dictatorial | l. multi-coloured | t. science dealing with living organisms |
| e. small village | m. Japanese born, Canadians | u. instrument for checking brain waves |
| f. first generation born in Canada | n. person with missing limb | v. collective indication of abnormalities |
| g. war-like hostility | o. democratic | w. heart beat analyzer |
| h. etiquette | p. expression peculiar to a language | x. deep gulch or ravine |

OBASAN

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: True or False (20 points)

In the space provided, write T if the statement is completely true or write F if any part of the statement is false.

- _____ 1. Aunt Emily finally reads Grandma Kato's letter aloud to Naomi and Stephen.
- _____ 2. Uncle Sam is buried as a Christian.
- _____ 3. Naomi has two aunts but only one is related by blood.
- _____ 4. Sam and Mark built boats together.
- _____ 5. Naomi can read Japanese.
- _____ 6. Once, Naomi's two friends are ordered not to play with her because she is reported to have T.B.
- _____ 7. Kenji rescues Naomi from drowning
- _____ 8. Uncle Sam tells the riddle: "We are both the enemy and not the enemy."
- _____ 9. During the war the Nakanes do not celebrate Christmas.
- _____ 10. The King bird is a mythical bird.

Part II: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Complete each of the following statements with the best response. Indicate your choice by writing the letter of the appropriate response in the space provided.

- _____ 1. The statement "Everyone someday dies" is often repeated by (a) Sensei (b) Naomi (c) Obasan (d) Sam.
- _____ 2. Before Slocan became a place of internment it was essentially (a) a fishing village (b) an agricultural town (c) a mining town (d) we are not told.
- _____ 3. "Maintiens le droit" ("Maintain the right") is (a) a Japanese saying (b) the motto of the R.C.M.P. (c) the motto of Canada (d) Obasan's philosophy.
- _____ 4. Naomi's father's name is (a) Mark (b) Dan (c) Sam (d) Aya.
- _____ 5. Aunt Emily's philosophy of life is (a) the meek will inherit the earth (b) forgive and forget (c) fight for just causes (d) learn to live with suffering.
- _____ 6. "These are icebreaker questions that create an awareness of ice." These questions were asked by (a) Mr. Barker (b) Stephen (c) Naomi (d) Aunt Emily.
- _____ 7. A haiku is (a) a 17 syllable word picture (b) a third generation female Japanese (c) a communal bath (d) a word written in Japanese.
- _____ 8. At the time of Naomi's uncle's death, Aunt Emily is in her (a) 40s (b) 50s (c) 60s (d) 70s.
- _____ 9. Naomi is five years old when Pearl Harbor was bombed in (a) 1940 (b) 1941 (c) 1942 (d) 1944.
- _____ 10. The main reason for Naomi's mother going to Japan was (a) to obey her father's request (b) to see the country of her birth again (c) to escape from her problems (d) to take care of her grandmother.

OBASAN

Part III: Short Answers (20 points)

In a word, phrase or no more than one sentence for each, answer any **TEN** of the following:

1. Who is described as being "a child of the waves?"
2. Naomi describes one aunt as living in sound and the other in stone. Which one lived in "sound?"
3. "Naked as prehistory, we lie together, the steam from the bath heavily misting the room." Who does Naomi bathe with?
4. Why did Obasan not go to a senior citizen's home, as advocated by Mr. Barker?
5. What was the fate of Grandma Kato?
6. What did Grandpa Kato do for a living?
7. What food is Uncle Sam noted for making?
8. How have the Japanese acknowledged the fact that Naomi's mother's grave is that of a Canadian?
9. What musical instruments does Stephen play?
10. Identify Old Man Gower.
11. How are Obasan, Sam, Stephen and Naomi employed in Granton, Alberta?

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answer one of the following, in approximately four paragraphs. Each paragraph should have a minimum of three sentences.

1. Was the detention of Japanese Canadians motivated by "reasonable cause" or by racial prejudice?
2. Compare and contrast Stephen to Naomi and indicate the type of relationship they share.

OBASAN

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: True or False (20 points)

Mark each answer either T for true or F if any part is false.

- _____ 1. "Even if there is rain or thunder, these ears cannot hear" is an example of Uncle Sam's humour.
- _____ 2. Naomi moves from Vancouver to a two-room house in Slocan.
- _____ 3. Nudity in the Nakane home is completely unacceptable.
- _____ 4. Uncle Sam and Obasan were not capable of having children.
- _____ 5. Aunt Emily and Naomi both graduated from Teachers' College.
- _____ 6. Naomi's mother was disfigured by an atomic bomb.
- _____ 7. Mrs. Nakane did not want her children to know what had happened to her.
- _____ 8. An ideograph for the word "love" shows a hand and a heart in action together.
- _____ 9. While in Granton, Naomi works in sugar beet production.
- _____ 10. At the end of *Obasan*, Naomi returns to Vancouver.

Part II: Identification (10 points)

Identify the characters discussed in the following sentences. Choose from the names in the list below. You may use some names more than once.

- _____ 1. "...half in and half out of his shell, is **Humpty Dumpty** — cracked and surly and unable to move."
- _____ 2. "The language of her grief is silence. **She** has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances."
- _____ 3. "In the face of growing bewilderment and distress, _____ roamed the landscape like an aircraft in a fog, looking for a place to land — a safe and sane strip of justice and reason."
- _____ 4. "**He** jabs his chest with his thumb and grunts. 'But smart people don't talk too much. Redskins know that. The King bird warned them a long time ago.'"
- _____ 5. "Keep your eyes down. When **you** are in the city, do not look into anyone's face. That way they may not see you."

- (a) Naomi
- (b) Stephen
- (c) Aunt Emily
- (d) Rough Lock Bill
- (e) Uncle Sam
- (f) Obasan
- (g) Naomi's mother
- (h) Old Man Gower

OBASAN

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Complete each of the following statements with the best response. Indicate your choice by writing the letter of the appropriate response in the space provided.

- _____ 1. "It's in the heat of the fire where the angel is found." Naomi thinks of Obasan's words (a) at Grandma Nakane's funeral (b) when she learns of her mother's death (c) at the bombing of Pearl Harbor (d) at the arrival in Slocan.
- _____ 2. The atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki in (a) 1941 (b) 1943 (c) 1944 (d) 1945.
- _____ 3. "Leukemia" is (a) a disease caused by atomic radiation (b) the disease that killed Uncle Sam (c) the music favoured by Stephen (d) the medical problem Dr. Nakane suffered from.
- _____ 4. Who gave Naomi her Japanese child doll? (a) Obasan (b) her mother (c) Aunt Emily (d) Mark.
- _____ 5. The expression "the yellow peril" is (a) a reference to a mother hen (b) a racist term referring to the Japanese (c) an unnatural disaster (c) slang used by Rough Lock Bill.
- _____ 6. Kenji is Naomi's (a) uncle (b) cousin (c) schoolfriend (d) father's friend.
- _____ 7. "Story" is for Naomi what (a) a white friend (b) school (c) music (d) art is for Stephen.
- _____ 8. Stephen is (a) two (b) three (c) four (d) five years older than Naomi.
- _____ 9. "We are both the enemy and not the enemy" is an example of (a) haiku (b) riddle (c) humour (d) biblical quotation.
- _____ 10. Grandma Kato's letter about the fate of their mother is (a) given to the children to read (b) paraphrased for them (c) read aloud to them in Japanese by an Anglican clergyman (d) translated for them into English by Aunt Emily.

Part IV: Short Answers (10 points)

In no more than one word, phrase or sentence for each, answer any FIVE of the following:

1. What provokes the memory that Uncle Sam was "a child of the waves" in Chapter 1?
2. Identify Mackenzie King.
3. What does the word "Sensei" mean?
4. What happened to Naomi's doll?
5. Who is Nakayama-sensei?
6. Where did Mark and Grandpa Nakane die?

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Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answer one of the following, in approximately four paragraphs. Each paragraph should contain a minimum of three sentences.

1. How has Naomi's past shaped her adult personality?
2. "How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone." Show how the themes of sound and silence are developed in the novel.

OBASAN

ANSWER KEY

VOCABULARY TEST

- | | |
|-------|-------|
| 1. p | 11. s |
| 2. t | 12. g |
| 3. k | 13. w |
| 4. h | 14. n |
| 5. r | 15. d |
| 6. v | 16. b |
| 7. i | 17. x |
| 8. j | 18. a |
| 9. e | 19. f |
| 10. q | 20. c |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. T |
| 2. T | 7. F |
| 3. T | 8. F |
| 4. T | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. T |

Part II: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. c | 6. a |
| 2. c | 7. a |
| 3. b | 8. b |
| 4. a | 9. b |
| 5. c | 10. d |

Part III: Short Answers (20 points)

1. Uncle Sam
2. Aunt Emily
3. Obasan
4. all white, culturally different
5. left for Japan
6. medical doctor
7. stone bread
8. planted a Canadian maple
9. flute and piano
10. child abuser from Vancouver days
11. sugar beet cultivation

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. T |
| 2. T | 7. T |
| 3. F | 8. T |
| 4. F | 9. T |
| 5. T | 10. F |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

1. b
2. f
3. c
4. d
5. a

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. a | 6. c |
| 2. c | 7. c |
| 3. a | 8. b |
| 4. b | 9. b |
| 5. b | 10. c |

Part III: Short Answers (20 points)

1. the grass of the coulee
2. Prime Minister of Canada during World War II
3. a third generation Japanese Canadian
(for example, Naomi)
4. lost on trip to Slocan
5. a Japanese Canadian clergyman
6. Slocan

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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