

Essay: *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa

"There is a silence that cannot speak." It is a silence that pervades every corner of her life and magnifies every sound. Until she was 36, Naomi's life was lived and ruled by silence. Many people were trapped by its spell: Mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, Uncle, Obasan, Stephen, and Naomi. What was it that this silence did and how did it affect those under its spell?

Within the Japanese culture there is a strong adherence to the belief that one must not show emotion, to spare others from your own burdens. It is a sort of code of silence. It is more honorable to be dignified than it is to show emotion. Naomi relates the story that her mother read to her as a child about a boy named Momotaro. When Momotaro must leave home, she says:

"There are no tears and no touch. Grandfather and Grandmother are careful, as he goes, not to weight his pack with their sorrow. . . What matters in the end, what matters above all, more than their loneliness or fear, is that Momotaro behave with honour. At all times what matters is to act with a fine intent. To do otherwise is shameful and brings dishonour to all" (56).

It is this code of silence, though, that ultimately splits the very stone upon which it rests. Its oppressive weight crushes the hearts of those loved ones it is supposed to protect. Uncle's life was virtually destroyed by his silence. Although he couldn't have much control over the forced evacuation of the Japanese, he apparently made no effort during or after the war to protest and try to get back the things the government took from him. For the rest of his life, he and Obasan lived in a small, ramshackle old house with homemade furniture, and scraps of this-and-that. Before the evacuation, they had a lovely house, nice things, and expensive clothes. After the evacuation, all of his tools for boat building were hung in the dark, dusty attic (24).

Because of his age after the war, I realize it was probably difficult for him to get work again, but it doesn't appear that he tried. Rather, he seemed just to accept what happened and he preferred to forget it and live as they were. It was more important to him that he live with honor and not make waves. Naomi describes him as stoic like an Indian (2). His silence caused him to give up the wish to go back to Vancouver. Instead, he spent the rest of his life making "stone bread" which was as inedible as the pervading silence.

For Obasan, the silence almost robbed her of human qualities. Naomi describes her as "(living) in stone" (32). Obasan seems to just function in her life, rather than to live it. Her hands are always busy; cleaning, fussing, serving. She moves "about deaf and impassive. . . her land is impenetrable, so that even the sound of mourning is swallowed up" (224). "She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands" (226).

Naomi continually describes her mouth as dry, "her lips . . . are flaked with dry skin . . . her mouth is plagued with a gummy saliva and she drinks tea to loosen her tongue sticking to the roof of her false plate" (12). It's like her mouth is becoming glued shut from lack of speaking.

The most pathetic description of Obasan is the obvious internal pain she is experiencing over the loss of Uncle. However, she has no way of venting it. She constantly does small insignificant chores to keep her hands busy. She kneels in her bed rubbing her hands over her knees, her head bowed. She keeps the ID picture of Uncle in her hand. She seems to be totally lost. Without emotions, she has no way out of herself, and the chasm of silence is choking her—abandoning her.

For Stephen, the silence is intolerable. He falls into silence to rebel against their silence. His silence is an escape and a cry for words: "Stephen, unable to bear the density of her inner retreat and the rebuke he felt in her silences, fled to the ends of the earth" (14). He ran to Aunt Emily, the "word warrior" and other parts of the world where there were words.

For Naomi, the wordless world was literally a nightmare. She is plagued with nightmares that have silence as a theme. She lived in a peculiar world of sight and sound as dark and silent as the world of Helen Keller. She was protected from ever knowing what was happening around her. People would leave or die, and she wouldn't be told. Even when her father left, no one said a word and she never got to say good-bye to him. "Then one day suddenly Father is not here again and I do not know what is happening" (179). As she grows up, her questions aren't answered. No matter how she persists, she is ignored: "The greater my urgency to know, the thicker her silences have always been" (45).

The silences to Naomi meant emptiness and betrayal. "Up through the earth come tiny cries of betrayal. There are so many betrayals—departures, deaths, absences . . . In all our life of preparation we are unprepared for this new hour filled with emptiness" (245).

Naomi's life lacks all emotion. Emily told her that as a child she "never cried . . . never spoke . . . never smiled . . . [was] a serious baby" (57). But Uncle's death and Aunt Emily's "paper" are the keys that make her realize how empty she really is:

"I want to get away from all this . . . From the past . . . from the present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words. I want to break loose from the heavy identity, the evidence of rejection, the unexpressed passion, the misunderstood politeness. I am tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum, unable to shout or sing or dance, unable to scream or swear, unable to laugh, unable to breathe out loud" (183).

Emily is not silent, as Naomi notes by calling her a "word warrior." Interestingly, Emily seems to be the only one who more or less escaped the horrors of the relocation program. Her persistence and her refusal to remain silent appears to have been to her advantage in avoiding much of the hardship that the others experienced. Even while the whole family is questioning what she is doing, Emily insists that they cannot remain silent and to let the world forget. "We have to deal with all this while we remember it. If we don't we'll pass our anger down in our genes. It's the children who'll suffer" (36).

Emily's insistency that we not forget is the same as that of Stephen Spielberg's (his comments at the Academy Awards). In my case, it's not even a matter of forgetting, but of a "lack of knowing". This lack of knowing which is so taboo to the Japanese culture is the very thing that prevents others from seeing the injustice. I didn't know until I read this book the horrors that the Japanese experienced in Canada and the US. The lack of knowing prevents awareness. It desensitizes us through naiveté and ignorance. What we can't see, we can't know. Only words can make us see.

The insidious silence that ruled over Naomi's world locked out healing from the wounds that the silence was supposed to protect from. The silence was a mask over the wounds, but underneath the wounds festered and split apart the flesh. What Naomi could not tell her mother was the very thing that divided them. The further silence about her mother, deepen the division. Only when Naomi learned the truth, could she begin to deal with the emotions and to begin the healing process. It was only then that she could go down to that underground stream, the river that flows through all of us:

"I had not known that Grief had such gentle eyes—eyes reflecting my uncle's eyes, my mother's eyes, all the familiar lost eyes of Love that are not his and that he dons as a mask and a mockery. . . . This body of grief is not fit for human habitation. Let there be flesh. The song of mourning is not a lifelong song . . . My loved ones, rest in your world of stone. Around you flows the underground stream . . . Above the trees, the moon is a pure white stone. The reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing" (246-7).