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Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*: Incarnational Theology and Shinto Materiality

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Abstract

Critics agree that Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* is a work charged with a powerful spirituality. This paper attempts to analyze that spirituality by identifying elements of Christian Incarnational theology as well as Shinto materiality. An understanding of Kogawa's unique blending of these elements helps the reader to understand the protagonist Naomi's moments of enlightenment in the final pages of the novel.

Keywords: Kogawa, *Obasan*, Incarnational theology, Shintoism, materiality, Japanese Canadian history

Joy Kogawa の *Obasan* における Anglican Incarnationalism と神道の物象主義

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Joy Kogawa's first novel, *Obasan* (1981), deals with the painful dispersal of the Japanese Canadian population of British Columbia into the interior of Canada during World War II. It sets the story of one young girl, Naomi, against the larger picture of the community's dispersal. Naomi's story is particularly painful because it involves her permanent separation from her mother, who had traveled to Japan just before the evacuation emergency brought on by Pearl Harbor. The young girl of five cannot comprehend or forgive her mother's ongoing absence; the resolution of this emotional dilemma is the major drama of the story.

Obasan, despite the realism of its historical narrative, is a highly lyrical tale. It wends its way through dreams and poems and is no stranger to enigma.

One major enigma is presented in the epigraph; its lines ring with familiar Christian terms, and yet it seems to be focused on a cross-cultural comparison of the silence treasured by Japanese culture and the expressiveness of the West:

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.

.....

Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream. (np)

For Christian readers, indeed for most readers in the West, Kogawa's poem-like epigraph resonates with the opening of the Gospel of John and its declaration "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made" (biblegateway.com).

But there is another element present in Kogawa's puzzling passage. That element involves objects from the natural world: grass and the sea, stone and a pock-marked earth. "The word is stone," Kogawa tells us at the very beginning of her haunting tale of love and separation; we will not know until the very last few chapters of the novel how such a dilemma might be resolved. My argument in this paper is that Kogawa combines the incarnational theology of the Anglican church with the pantheistic mysticism of Shinto to forge her resolution, finding a way in which "the stone bursts with telling" and "the seed flowers with speech."

Incarnational Theology: What is it?

The incarnation refers, of course, to that very dogma revealed in John's Gospel, the belief that Jesus Christ with his divine nature became flesh: John's words present a contrast to Kogawa's declaration that "the word is stone": The website seasonsofcreation.com tells us that

The classic text of John 1.14 reads: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

This "becoming flesh" involves not only the redemption of human beings through divinity's taking on biological form; it also involves the transformation of nature itself, now charged with an unforeseeable sap that rises toward an unknowable harvest. Again, the same website provides us with an astute explanation by Niels Gregersen:

In this context, the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood as a radical or "deep" incarnation, that is, an incarnation *into the very tissue of biological existence*, the system of nature. Understood in this way, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God's redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as the victims of social competition. (2001, 205: emphasis added)

Lichtmann (1998) explains what the Incarnation meant to another writer fascinated by the implications of the word becoming flesh, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:

For Hopkins, there are two Incarnations: an Incarnation into angelic, "aeonian" time precedes the one into ordinary time. Christ's historical Incarnation is superseded by an Incarnation not into human existence but into simple matter. (38: emphasis added)

We can see this preoccupation with the way in which the Incarnation has transformed simple matter in Hopkins' poetry, perhaps most notably in "God's Grandeur," particularly its opening lines:

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. (bartelby.com)

The idea that nature is charged with divine power is, as Lichtmann suggests, a product of Hopkins' life-long concern with the Incarnation. Deep down in nature, Hopkins believed, is the renewing force

of the divine; we see it in the next stanza of “God’s Grandeur” in which Hopkins would have it that

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things . . .

It is a far cry, one must admit, from the enigmatic declarations of Kogawa’s epigraph to the effusive pronouncements of the British Catholic poet. And yet, as I will show, the resolution of Naomi’s long-term grief at the end of *Obasan* involves a similar vision of nature charged with a mystical presence. That presence is informed less by the Incarnational tenets of the Anglican church in which Naomi has been raised as by a mystical materiality derived from Shinto, the Japanese indigenous nature religion.

Fodor (2011), like many other commentators on the characteristics of Anglican spirituality, posits incarnationalism or “embodiment” at the heart of the faith (270). The world of the Japanese Canadian community which Naomi inhabits in *Obasan* participates in the Anglican faith. There are many scenes in which the Japanese Canadian Anglican minister, Nakayama Sensei, appears and prays or performs ceremonies, but Naomi herself is somewhat distant from these activities. Blackburn (2004) claims that

From *Obasan* to *Itsuka*, narrator Naomi seeks a “word made flesh” solution to many controversial spiritual and political problems. Without a full understanding of the Incarnation—Christ the “Word made flesh,” Naomi’s highly politicized “liberation translation” sometimes fails to fully translate the internal spiritual dimensions of Christianity. (84)

While Blackburn’s argument contains a somewhat biased belief that Kogawa’s use of Christianity incorporates a “mis-translation of the faith” (cf in the above quote “sometimes fails to fully translate . . .”) it does correctly identify the most important Christian element in *Obasan* and its sequel, *Itsuka*, as incarnational theology. In this article I will sketch the confluent lines of this incarnational theology and the emphasis on materiality in Shintoism, showing how both direct our eyes to “the forest braille” (246) that unlocks the mystery of loss and love in the final pages of *Obasan*.

The Materiality of Shintoism: How can we understand it?

Masatsugu Maruyama (2000) presents an account of the spiritual materiality of Shintoism in his “Deconstructive Ecofeminism: A Japanese Critical Interpretation.” Ecofeminists, he argues, see a commonality between the destruction of nature and the patriarchal oppression of women. “They insist that the main cause of this oppression is ‘hierarchical dualism’, and therefore, they seek a strategy of liberation by transcending this dual-ism’ (20). Maruyama seeks to find a resolution that would satisfy the ecofeminists’ quest for a non-dualistic system of belief by describing the materiality of nature that is sacred to the Japanese people.

He admits that much of nature in Japan has been destroyed in various construction projects and

other waste-ful practices of modernity, but insists that something of the Shinto beliefs remain: "Indeed, although modern developments destroy mountains, hills and villages, there are strictly defended holy forests around most Shinto shrines; Japanese people treat these areas as sanctuaries" (21). His remarks have significance for our treatment of Kogawa's spirituality in *Obasan*; indeed, as we shall see, it is not in any church that Naomi finds enlightenment, but in an imagined forest of the heart.

A more difficult question involves just how Shintoism sees the materiality of nature and invests it with a spiritual significance. Maruyama goes to some length to describe the spirituality already present in the earliest of Japanese records, the *Kojiki* and the *Manyoshu*:

Hitomaro Kakinomoto, one of the representative poets in *Manyoshu*, writes "O you yellow leaves, That fall upon the autumn slopes—If only for a moment, Do not whirl down in such confusion, That I may see where my beloved dwells" (Miner, E. et al. 1985: 23). This type of expression is called "*Mono-ni-yosete-omoi-wo-nobu*". This can be generally translated as an "expression via nature". In this case, "*Mono*" means "nature", but interestingly, as I have suggested before, "*Mono*" means simultaneously "soul". In ancient times, Japanese people saw nature not as "dead things" but as "living things" even if it did not scientifically have a life. So at this time it was thought that all natural beings as well as humans have selves in their own manner. (28–30)

An even more dramatic example of the spiritual vitality ascribed to the natural world lies in the narrative techniques of Japan's indigenous tribes, the Ainu. In their stories, called *yukar*, the narrator is not human but a part of nature: a bear, a wolf, an owl. Tsushima Yuko (1994) explains the importance of this fact:

I am especially moved by the fact that the *yukar* are all narrated in the first person. We see the world through the eyes of a bear, the world as described by an owl, the different worlds described by a deer, a snake, a fox, a wolf, a spider. The sea, the rivers, the valley, each speak with their own voice. (196)

The dualism which eco-feminists see as the fundamental problem of overcoming patriarchal domination of woman as well as the destruction of nature is clearly not a part of Shinto materiality. Or to be more precise, as Maruyama notes (28), using the Japanese rather the Chinese reading of the word Shinto, there is no dualism in the *kami-no-michi*, the way of the many gods.

Embodiment and materiality in *Obasan*

The story begins in Southern Alberta where Naomi, now thirty-six, has come to settle after the

wandering years of the relocation. Unlike Japanese Americans put into relocation camps during the war, Japanese Canadians were not allowed to return to the West coast after the war. Naomi is an elementary school teacher in a small town in Southern Alberta, and it is clear from a classroom scene that she is somewhat bullied by her pupils, who are by no means free of racial prejudice even at this distance (1972) from the end of the war.

The opening chapters center around the upcoming event of the death of Naomi's uncle and guardian, Sam Ojisan, or simply "Uncle." The opening chapter describes a visit to a coulee that took place a little more than a month before, in August of 1972. Uncle has brought Naomi here every year since 1954. The exact date of their visit is on August ninth, the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, an event that has tremendous, but yet unknown—to her—significance for Naomi.

The word "coulee," Wikipedia tells us, "is applied rather loosely to different landforms, all of which refer to a kind of valley or drainage zone." We can imagine Uncle and Naomi have come to an area of extensive grasslands, part of which juts out above a stream below. While the area they walk through is a seemingly endless grass prairie ("*Umi no yo*") (1) says Uncle in Japanese, "Just like the sea") trees are found at the base of the coulee, near the stream. The word coulee itself, Wikipedia tells us, comes from the French verb *couler*, to flow. The movement of water underground, in the midst of trees, is the most significant landscape for Naomi's enlightenment at the end of the novel.

As Naomi walks with Uncle through the tall grass, she remembers the first time she came here with Uncle, in August of 1954. At that time Uncle was visibly upset, having recently received the news of Naomi's mother's death from radiation sickness; she had been in Nagasaki at the time of the atomic bombing. A Canadian citizen, she had gone back to Japan just before the war broke out to tend to an ailing relative. Bits of news about her have reached Obasan and Uncle, but everything has been kept from Naomi and her brother in accordance with the Japanese idea that children should be shielded from anything upsetting ("*kodomo no tame*"—"for the sake of the children").

Uncle has brought Naomi here every year around the anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing. This is his way of remembering Naomi's mother; but he has never told Naomi why they come here. The first time they came, in 1954, Uncle questioned Naomi about her age, perhaps debating telling her the news he has just heard; when he hears that she is now eighteen, he sinks back under the *kodomo no tame* policy. Now she is 36, and still knows nothing about why they come to the coulee at this time of year. She still harbors resentment against the mother who has remained silent for so long.

Just a little more than a month after this last visit to the coulee Naomi receives a phone call at school telling her that Uncle is dead. This event propels the drama of the novel, the retelling of the saga of the wartime evacuation of Japanese Canadians from coastal areas, the dreams and poems that move with a logic of their own, until at the end Naomi visits the coulee twice; once in her mind, where she experiences enlightenment, and once in the early morning hours experiencing the peace of knowledge put to rest.

The movement downwards, through the trees and towards the water, is an important one in Naomi's spiritual journey. When Naomi imagines the movement of Uncle's consciousness in his last moments she muses

Perhaps everything was reversing rapidly and he was tunneling backwards top to bottom, his feet in an upstairs attic of humus and memory, his hands groping down through the cracks and walls to the damp cellar, to the water, down to the underground sea. (14)

This progression, from the materiality of earth, roots, and tangled trees to an underground source of water—the “amniotic deep” of Kogawa's epigraph—is the most important motion in the novel. It suggests the unity and fluidity of nature, the radiant sap draining from the confluent trees and sensate soil into the underground flow of unseen rivers.

Aya Obasan, Naomi's aunt and the wife of Uncle, is the embodiment of what might be called the traditional Japanese way of life. She is first generation (issei) Japanese Canadian and is very different from Aunt Emily, Naomi's highly political (“word warrior”) second-generation (nissei) aunt. Aya Obasan says very little. Naomi tells us, as she sits with Obasan after Uncle's death, that

The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful. (14)

Silence is a major issue in *Obasan*. As we have seen, the very first words of the epigraph pose the problem at the heart of the novel: “There is a silence that cannot speak . . . There is a silence that will not speak . . .” And yet the words that follow, as if to pose a solution, put us in mind of the trips to the coulee and Uncle's downward journey: “Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep.”

Naomi has had the example set by two aunts in front of her all her life. She has seen her Aunt Emily fight with the Canadian government for redress for the property it confiscated from Japanese Canadians at the time of the evacuation. Aunt Emily has tried to instill in Naomi a keen sense of the racism that could banish Canadian citizens from their own homes into the wilderness of the interior. Aunt Emily's theology is all about liberation; it is incarnational in the sense that it attempts to further the work of justice already begun with Christ's having become flesh.

The example that her other aunt, Aya Obasan, sets for Naomi is a more complicated matter to explain. Aya Obasan is a wordless practitioner of daily life, a pilgrim in the way of *shugyou*, (修行) a Japanese term used for both monks who practice the asceticism of temple life and, in general, people who are intent on mastering a trade and follow the example of the professional who trains them. It can also be used for practioners of daily life such as Obasan; her way is wordless, but she has taught Naomi

how to live through her daily example.

Shugyo is a unique type of materiality; we could even say that it involves incarnationalism, in a very loose sense. *Shugyou* brings into being a human product who embodies the way that he/she has relentlessly followed. Like the Christian monks and nuns of former eras, the practitioner of *shugyo* becomes “a living rule,” a person from whom the complete details of the rule could be reconstructed if observed. Aya Obasan is the embodiment of the Japanese way of life, and it is Aya Obasan whom Naomi chooses as her model, not the “word warrior” Aunt Emily.

Christianity in *Obasan*

After the echoes of John’s Gospel in the epigraph there are few Christian echoes in the narrative of Naomi’s early, happy prewar life in Vancouver. The next infusion of Christian thought occurs at the beginning of Chapter Fifteen in the description of the mass enforced exodus of Japanese Canadians from the coast of British Columbia.

Again, the Biblical reference is from the Gospel of John 9, to the story of the blind man cured by Jesus. There is a heavy irony in Naomi’s words as she imagines the Japanese Canadians to be “sent to Siloam, the pool called “Sent”:

We are the silences that speak from stone. We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication, a trainload of eyes covered with mud and spittle. We are the man in the Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of the light. We are sent to Siloam, the pool called “Sent.” We are sent to the sending, that we may bring light. (111)

Kogawa plays on the idea of being “sent” in a very ironic way, and yet in a way that again emphasizes the Incarnational aspect of Christian theology. Biblical scholars have much to say about John’s specifically explaining the meaning of the pool’s name from which Jesus drew water to heal the blind man’s eyes:

The Biblical exegesis website Hermeneutics.exchangestack.com provides the following commentary on the words “sent to Siloam, the pool called ‘Sent’”:

In John 9, Jesus performs the miracle of healing the blind man in a rather unorthodox manner. He first creates some mud or clay out of the dirt and his saliva, then he “anoints” the man’s eyes, and then he tells him to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. After Jesus gives these instructions, John goes out of his way to point out that the name of the pool means “Sent.”

Of course the overriding context of “sent” in Kogawa’s passage is the enforced dispersal of Japanese

Canadians from the B.C. coast. This is the incredible historical reality. But by embroidering this actuality with the words from John's Gospel Kogawa adds some layers of theological implications. Biblical commentators speculate that John specifies the meaning of Siloam because he wants to invoke the Incarnational theme that Jesus is sent by the Father into this world.

Kogawa weaves this strand into the poetry of her writing together with the idea that the dispersed Japanese Canadians themselves form a Pentecostal sending of those with vision to those who are blind. Kogawa's novel had this very effect upon the Canadian community at large; for the first time Canadian citizens had their eyes opened to the blatant racism of the evacuation. "We are the man in the Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of the light" enjoins the banished community with the Incarnate Christ. The passage shows Naomi's consciousness of the meaning of the Gospels. It is a powerful blessing on a reviled people.

"It was an evacuation all right," Naomi's activist Aunt Emily later says. "Just plopped here in the wilderness. Flushed out of Vancouver. Like dung drops. Maggot bait." (118) Naomi herself sees a headline in a B. C. newspaper referring to the dispersed community: "They are a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada" (118). Naomi and Stephen, with their guardians Uncle and Obasan, move from place to place in the interior, to abandoned silver mining towns and sugar beet farming communities.

From time to time Nakayama Sensei, the Anglican minister who attends to the dispersed community's needs appears, but Naomi has no more than a passing interest in the prayers and services he performs. She is usually distracted at such times, watching the older people present.

It is Nakayama Sensei who finds them an abandoned forest hut in the forests of Slocan. In its decomposed state it has almost melted into the forest. "It seems more like a giant toadstool than a building," (121) Naomi reports. However primitive the accommodation, Naomi is spiritually at home in the forest. As Nakayama Sensei intones a prayer of thanksgiving, Stephen and Naomi explore the back of the house. As they move from the greyness of the interior to the forest air, Naomi finds herself at home: "Ah! The green air once more" she murmurs.

It is in the forest, in the green air, that spirituality is alive. As we stand here looking over an overgrown tangle of weeds and vines, the air is suddenly swarming with butterflies. Up and down like drunken dancers, the gold and brown winged things come down the side of the mountain fluttering awkwardly. There are dozens of them. Some park like tiny helicopters on grass stalks, flexing their wings as if for take-off. (122)

Naomi is taken with the beauty of the pattern on the butterflies' wings: "Each wing bears two round circles of gold and when the pairs are spread they are infant eyes, staring up at us bodiless and unblinking" (122-3).

Stephen's response to this sudden beauty is to swing at the creatures using his crutch "like a sythe"

(123). “They’re bad,” he insists, “They eat holes in your clothes” (123). But even as he “continues his crusade” (123) against them, Naomi notices something hidden to Stephen: as he goes to the end of the yard and turns around, one of the gold creatures is “hovering above his head” (123). In the green air of this remote mountain forest we glimpse an image of Pentecost.

Naomi’s Enlightenment

The last few chapters of the novel return us to the present of the time after Uncle’s death when Aunt Emily and Stephen come back to Alberta for a memorial service with Reverend Nakayama. It is during this time that Aunt Emily and Obasan break their silence regarding the fate of Naomi’s mother. Two thin letters from Japan are read out and explained by Nakayama Sensei. They tell a tale of horror, of details surrounding that August day in Nagasaki which started out in a very ordinary way for Naomi’s mother and grandmother but turned into a living hell in the immediate aftermath of the atomic bomb. The letters are written by Grandmother Kato and describe the chaos of that time, of how she found Naomi’s mother sitting by the side of the road with maggots squirming in her wounds, her face disfigured by the blast.

After the decades of silence and not knowing, after the years of half-hoping for her mother’s return, the hideous actuality of her mother’s suffering and death enter powerfully into Naomi’s imagination. Nakayama Sensei intones a long prayer after reading the letter, prayers based on the need to forgive in order to be forgiven expressed in the Christian Lord’s Prayer. Naomi is not listening. She tells us that

I am not thinking of forgiveness. The sound of Sensei’s voice grows as indistinct as the hum of distant traffic. Gradually the room grows still and it is as if I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life. (140).

Naomi is seeking her own resolution to the actuality that fills her imagination. That resolution will come in and through nature. Chapter 38 is Naomi’s own prayer to her mother. The mixture of Incarnational theology and Shinto materialism is evident in the words she addresses to her mother:

Tonight, Aunt Emily has said a missionary found your name on a plaque of the dead. A Canadian maple tree grows there where your name stands. The tree utters its scarlet voice in the air. Prayers bleeding. Its rustling leaves are fingers scratching an empty sky. (241)

Naomi cannot describe her relation with her mother without using forest imagery. Thinking of an old photograph of herself with her mother in Vancouver she muses, “Your leg is a tree trunk and I am branch, vine, butterfly. I am joined to your limbs by right of birth, child of your flesh, leaf of your

bough" (242-3).

Nakayama Sensei is still praying, asking God to "Teach us to see Love's presence in our abandonment. Teach us to forgive" (243). But Naomi is not listening; she continues to address her mother, mulling over the issue of embodiment:

I am thinking that for a child there is no presence without flesh. But perhaps it is because I am no longer a child I can know your presence though you are not here. The letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves. (243)

In the last few pages of the novel two significant things happen. Naomi has spent a sleepless night, and her imagination is alive with the strain of reconciling a new kind of knowledge that has disclosed at long last how the "stone [can] burst with telling," and how "the seed flowers with speech." She has contemplated what grief is during the long night and has reached a conclusion: "The body of grief is not fit for human habitation. Let there be flesh" (246). It is Naomi's call for incarnation, for the materiality of the forest where she now greets all of her beloved dead:

Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight, to the place where the colors all meet—red and yellow and blue. We have turned and returned to your arms as you turn to earth and form the forest floor. Tonight we picked berries with the help of your sighted hands. Tonight we read the forest braille. (246)

The motion downward to the forest floor and the underground stream which started at the coulee with Uncle finds a climax in Naomi's new understanding that love flows through the sap of the trees and through the stream beneath. Again she addresses her beloved dead: "My loved ones, rest in your world of stone. Around you flows the underground stream. How bright in the darkness the brooding light. How gentle the colours of rain" (246).

While the others are still sleeping Naomi puts on Aunt Emily's warm coat and drives to the coulee. The forest scene in her imagination is followed by a return to the coulee, where she walks through the wet grass to the slope that leads down to where the underground stream "seeps through the earth" (247). Kogawa's montage of embodiment ends here, among the roses and wild flowers of the coulee, the place where it all began.

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