

**OBASAN AND MITSUYE YAMADA'S POETRY\***

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**Abstract:** The Japanese American community has been deeply marked by the internment experience as a result of the Second World War. This historical event demonstrated the fact that, despite the multicultural nature of U.S. and Canadian societies, notions of white supremacy were the ones that prevailed. Joy Kogawa and Mitsuye Yamada were two of the first voices that emerged breaking the silence of Canadian and American citizens of Japanese origin. They explore the ways in which the racist policies of their respective countries had affected not only their own lives, but also that of their ancestors and of the younger generations.

**Keywords:** Japanese American community, concentration camps, World War II, multiculturalism, United States, Canada, Joy Kogawa, Mitsuye Yamada, silence, racism.

**Resumen:** La comunidad japonesa-americana se ha visto marcada por la experiencia del internamiento en campos de concentración a consecuencia de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Este hecho histórico demostró que a pesar del carácter multicultural de las sociedades estadounidense y canadiense lo que prevalecía era la noción de la supremacía blanca. Joy Kogawa y Mitsuye Yamada fueron de las primeras voces que rompieron con el silencio de canadienses y estadounidenses de origen japonés. Ambas exploran cómo las políticas racistas de sus respectivos países han afectado no sólo sus vidas, sino también las de sus antepasados y la de las generaciones más jóvenes.

**Palabras clave:** Comunidad japonesa-americana, campos de concentración, Segunda Guerra Mundial, multiculturalismo, Estados Unidos, Canadá, Joy Kogawa, Mitsuye Yamada, silencio, racismo.

I can see myself today as a person historically defined by law and custom as being forever alien. Being neither "free white," nor "African," our people in California were deemed "aliens, ineligible for citizenship," no matter how long they intended to stay here. Aliens ineligible for citizenship were prohibited from owning, buying, or leasing land. They did not and could not belong here. The voice in me remembers that I am always a *Japanese* American in the eyes of many. A third-generation German American is an

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American. A third-generation Japanese American is a Japanese American. Being Japanese means being a danger to the country during the war and knowing how to use chopsticks. I wear this history in my face. (Noda 1989: 244)

Canada and the United States share common traits in that both are multicultural societies formed by immigrants whose mainstream population is of European origin.<sup>1</sup> As a result both nations have a common history of antagonism towards non-white immigrants reflected, for example, in legislation and in the “relocation” or “removal” of first generation Japanese immigrants and citizens of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast beginning in 1942.

Unsurprisingly Japanese American experiences in both countries run parallel to each other and are useful to illustrate how representations of certain social groups are used, transformed and manipulated, having practical effects on the lives of its members. For this reason a text by a Japanese Canadian, Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, is used together with Mitsuye Yamada’s poetry to analyse the Japanese American experience as a result of the attack on Pearl Harbour 7 December 1941. The texts are complementary in demonstrating various aspects of the Japanese American experience around the years of World War II and their consequences.

In the case of the United States, Japanese immigration was limited in 1906 with the Gentlemen’s Agreement, according to which only relatives of those Japanese already living in the U.S. could enter the country. Total prohibition came with the 1924 Immigration Act. Their property rights were also limited, especially in California where there was the highest concentration of Japanese immigrants in the mainland. In 1913 the state of California passed the Alien Law Act, forbidding ownership of agricultural land to “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” meaning Asians. In 1920 the prohibition was extended to leasing and sharecropping. As a result, property was bought in the name of the second generation –the Nisei– U.S. citizens by birthright. The majority of immigrants of Asian origin continued to be ineligible to citizenship until 1952. In fact, Mitsuye Yamada, born in Japan but brought up in Seattle, Washington, did not become a naturalised U.S citizen until 1955.

Parallels therefore can be established between California and British Columbia. As early as 1878 this Canadian province enacted the Labour Regulation Act which forbade Asians to be employed on projects provided by provincial franchise (Cheng Lok Chua 1992: 97). Other examples of Canada’s anti-Asian legislation are the 1923 Act forbidding Chinese immigration, together with the denial of the right to vote to Canadians of Asian origin until 1947. Although the United States has traditionally been associated with the creation of concentration camps for its Japanese American population, Canada was the first to take such a measure almost a month before Executive Order 9066 was promulgated on 20 February 1942. This order was the one empowering the U.S. army to establish military areas from which to exclude the Japanese community, regardless of U.S. citizenship.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact Canada has legally adopted multiculturalism by the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, assented to on 21 July, 1988, according to which the Government of Canada commits itself “to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life” of the country.

Michi Nisiura Weglyn and Kogawa, through one of her novel's characters, Aunt Emily, argue that Canada's policies were more drastic than those adopted by Washington. Families were initially divided since the men were sent to labour camps a few weeks before the rest of the members were sent to the "ghost towns," in most cases abandoned mining communities of the interior. The Canadian authorities confiscated and auctioned unsold property so as to cover the costs of forced removal. Once the war was over, Canada refused to allow Japanese Canadians to return to the West Coast until 1949, seven years after the evacuation of 23,000 Japanese Canadians, 75 percent of which were Canadian citizens.

As in the case of other non-white peoples, especially Chinese, the first wave of Japanese immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century was treated as indentured labour in the sugar cane plantations of Hawaii and the farms of California. It is calculated that between 1861-1940 about 275,000 Japanese moved from Hawaii –a U.S territory until 1959– to the mainland. Although the majority settled in California, by 1941 they represented only 1 percent of the population.

Coming from a highly stratified society where respect for authority and obedience were strong values, Japanese were considered –and therefore were represented– as hard-working, meek people. The representation of Asians as inferior in general and of Japanese in particular was reinforced by the idea that they seemed to need little to survive as a result of being cheap labour. In fact, this image had such strength that when Japanese Americans began to claim for equal pay Caucasians accused them of being arrogant and of not "knowing their place" (Kim 1989: 122).

Caucasians were not particularly concerned about the appropriation of unwanted land, like marshlands and deserts, by the Japanese until they began to prosper by making the land fertile and profitable as a result of applying centuries old agricultural techniques. Although before 1940 Japanese Americans controlled less than 4 percent of California's total farmland, by 1920 they produced 10 percent of the total value of the state's farm crops. Chicano author Alejandro Morales reflects this, together with the antagonism that this created among white Americans, in his novel *The Brick People*. Japanese families are the ones who help one of the characters, Malaquíás, to prosper outside the Simons brick factory:

The Japanese made Malaquíás a successful farmer. Matola, Ajimba, Matusaki, and Yokohira taught Malaquíás many farming techniques which made his thirty acres produce bumper crops yearly. In return, he shared his tools and his time in helping them transport their crops to the market.

The Japanese were considered rich by people on the outside. They did not require much to keep them going and most of their money was sent to their mother country. (Morales 1988: 135)

Morales continues to explain that the most successful families abandoned the region, pointing out the fact that they were harassed to do so. These facts in turn were reflected in the discriminatory legislation passed by the U.S concerning immigration and property rights.

In the case of the first generation of Japanese Canadians –the Issei– living in British Columbia, these were mostly successful fishermen and shipbuilders as Grandpa Nakane,

the grandfather of Naomi, *Obasan's* main character. Considered by the family to be a "number one boat builder" and "a son of the sea," he was the first of the protagonist's grandparents to move to Canada in 1893,

...wearing a western suit, round black hat, and platformed geta on his feet. When he left his familiar island, he became a stranger, sailing towards an island of strangers but the sea was his constant companion. He understood its angers, its whispers, its generosity. The native Songhies of Esquimalt and many Japanese fishermen came to his boat-building ship on Saltspring Island, to barter and to buy. Grandfather prospered. His cousin's widow wife and her son, Isamu, joined him. (Kogawa 1981: 18)

Whilst the measures taken by the U.S authorities prior to relocation, such as freezing financial assets, were aimed at forcing Japanese Americans to sell their property and businesses, in the case of the Japanese Canadians their fishing licenses were suspended and their fishing boats confiscated together with the rest of their property (33).

The transformation of Japanese Americans as indecipherable, secretive, unreliable people has to be related not only to the envy created by their economic success and therefore to the competition they represented, but also to the new position acquired by Imperial Japan in the international arena. In less than forty years Japan had become a naval power, being the first Asian nation to defeat a European power in modern history in the Russo-Japanese War. Japan represented a threat to American and European hegemony in the Pacific basin as proved by Pearl Harbour. One must not forget the events in the Pacific War prior to the U.S entry. Between 1941-42 Japan's conquests challenged, in John W. Dower's words, not only Western presence in the region "but the entire mystic of white supremacy on which countries of European and American expansion had rested" (1986: 6). It should also be highlighted that Japan did not conquer independent countries in southern Asia but Western colonial outpost and by doing so white racial and cultural supremacy over non-white peoples was questioned.

It is worth noting the shifting nature of forms of representation, specifically that of stereotypes. Using the work of Richard Dyer, these can be defined as simple forms which nonetheless, by using partial and incomplete but easily understood traits, contain complex information about our vision of the world and the power relations involved. What needs to be emphasised is that stereotypes reflect not only how we see others but also how we see ourselves. It is therefore of prime importance to be aware of who is in control of such constructions for it will provide us with information about the way those in power construct themselves.

Western images of the "Other" Asian are linked to those of other conquered peoples in Africa, India and the American Continent. At times they were seen as "lesser men" –a missing link between apes and fully human beings– or childlike creatures proved by the fact of having succumbed to European/U.S power. Whenever danger of insurrection or other forms of opposition appeared, their imagery was generally brutalised being represented as mad, irrational beings (Dower 1986: 3-14).

The evolution of Japanese-American relations thus had its effects upon the imagery of Japanese in the North American continent. The mainstream representation of Americanness

as white, middle-class and heterosexual was in opposition to the presence of American non-white people whose origins in the country could be traced as far back, or even before, as that of many white Americans. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's concept of the "American Ambivalent" is relevant in this discussion. She argues that identity for immigrants "encompass[es] more than one figure simultaneously" leading to the existence of multiple perspectives for that same figure. She is careful to highlight that these cannot be seen simultaneously:

...only through a switch in focus can one envision one or the other figure. Though we know both figures exist in this optical illusion, we can only see one at a time. Human sight cannot hold contradictory vision in one glance. So too with the identity of alien and American, they are conscious of only one or the other at any one time. (1992: 22)

This ambivalence allows for a switch in focus so as to discover a different perspective of a certain figure with social effects upon the lives of those belonging to the same group. If the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour was a sign of treachery, then those living on U.S soil were the same. Geok-Lin Lim concludes that for Japanese Americans, the attack "marked that point in their history when ambivalence, the ambivalence in their own community toward Americanization and the ambivalence in the larger society towards assimilating these Asian immigrants, became visible" (1992: 23-24). This was to have deep psychological effects upon the second generation –the Nisei– and especially upon a subgroup within the Nisei –the Kibei– those born in the United States but who had received part of their formal and cultural education in Japan.

For Japanese Americans this concept of ambivalence has to be qualified by racial aspects. Their experience during World War II is a strong reminder that external biological features, skin colour and slant eyes, can be perceived as "irreducible content of our selves (Lim 1992: 26). In other words, ethnicity is used as a marker with social-political content reflected in everyday behaviour, from violent acts to discriminatory legislation. As writer John Okada states in the preface of his novel *No-No Boy*:

The Japanese who were born Americans and remained Japanese because of biology does not know the meaning of patriotism no longer worried about whether they were Japanese-Americans or American-Japanese. They were Japanese, just as their Japanese mothers and Japanese fathers and Japanese brothers and sisters. The radio had said so. (Quoted in Geok-lin Lim 1992: 24)

The experiences of North Americans of Japanese ancestry problematise and challenge racial representations of nationalism as expressed by authors Okada, Kogawa and Yamada.

Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) deals with the protagonist's struggle –Naomi– to come to terms with her experiences as a child when her family was forcibly removed from Vancouver to Slocan, one of the ghost towns in the interior, and the policy of segregation carried out by the Canadian government despite the end of the war. The novel's present time is 1972, when Naomi's uncle, who has played the role of father for her, and her older brother Stephen, dies. At the beginning of the novel Kogawa proves, despite Canada's multicultural

composition, how race is equated to national identity by describing the protagonist's date with a Caucasian.

"Where do you come from?" he asked, as we sat down at a small table in a corner. That's the one sure-fire question I always get from strangers. People assume when they meet me that I'm a foreigner.

"How do you mean?"

"How long have you been in this country?"

"I was born here."

"Oh," he said, and grinned. (1981: 7)

Yamada also refers to this issue in a short poem addressed to one of her sons titled "Mirror Mirror":

People keep asking where I come from  
says my son.  
Trouble is  
I'm american on the inside  
and oriental on the outside  
No Kai  
Turn that outside in  
THIS is what American looks like. (1998: 56)

The fact that ethnicity is equated to identity had as one of its most dramatic effects the internment of Japanese citizens living in North America together with their offspring of either U.S. or Canadian citizenship. Ironically, many Issei would have become naturalised citizens had it not been for discriminatory legislation forbidding them to do so. Most Issei were characterised for their endeavours to assimilate within U.S. society. Unlike Chinese immigrants, for example, Japanese adopted Western clothes and mannerisms. This attitude was obviously linked to Japan's rapid modernisation since 1868 with the Meiji Revolution and its obsession to emulate Western powers. According to Daisuke Kitagawa, the Issei saw America "as his land of opportunity, where he could finally make a man of himself. He came to America filled with dreams. He was fully prepared to undergo any degree of hardship and to discard Japanese costumes and manners that could help him realise his dreams" (quoted in Kim 1982: 123).

As a result, some of these immigrants converted to Christianity and tried to learn English. In *Obasan*, Naomi's family is Christian. Whilst the first generation, Uncle Nakane and his wife, Obasan –Japanese for "aunt"– speak broken English, Naomi's parents, who are Nisei, are fully bilingual. Elaine H. Kim argues that whilst the Issei found themselves "in a perpetual limbo, suspended between two worlds, neither of which he could claim their own" their children had to deal with what she defines as the "Nisei dilemma". This was a far worse situation since a Nisei "was rejected by his own country. By law he was an American citizen; he had no sense of belonging to another country [...] he was treated by American society as an undesirable alien" (1982: 128-129).

Kogawa depicts this situation by making her protagonist recall an incident as a child. Her parents had brought a dozen yellow chicks which were kept apart from a white hen in a cage. Naomi places the chicks inside the hen's cage, believing that she will take care of them. What happens is the opposite:

Without warning, the hen's sharp beak jabs down on the chick, up again and down, deliberate as the needle on a sewing machine. A high trilling squeal and the chick spreads its short wings like a fan as it flops forward. Again and again the hen's beak strikes and the chick lies on its side on the floor, its neck twisted back, its wings outstretched fingers. (1981: 59)

Colour symbolism needs no further explanation.

In her poetry Yamada also makes ironic references to the fact that the State in charge of the defence of its own citizens and residents, many of whom had contributed to the wealth of the country, were actually imprisoned. "Block 4 Barrack 2 "Apt" C" starts with the following lines:

The barbed fence  
*protected us*  
From wildly twisted sagabush. (1998: 19 emphasis added)

In another poem, "Harmony at the Fair Grounds", Yamada describes the first impressions of a child when arriving at one of the Assembly Centres which were first set up before final relocation. Most of these centres were built on former racetracks or fairgrounds under deplorable health conditions:

Why is the soldier boy in a cage  
like that?  
In the freedom of the child's  
universe  
the uniformed guard  
stood trapped in his outside cage.  
We walked away from the gate and  
grated guard  
on sawdusted grounds  
where millions trod once  
to view prize cows  
at Puyallup Fair. (15)

These lines point at the hysteria felt by white America at the outbreak of the war, and above all at their fear, which entrapped them too, as it did the guard in the watchtower. Ironically, over half of those to be feared were children and under age youths.

The "Nisei dilemma" was exacerbated during incarceration. Some people reacted in anger at the violation of their constitutional rights. In early 1943, when U.S. authorities decided to divide "loyals" from "disloyals" via the "Application for Leave Clearance" questionnaire, many answered "unsatisfactorily" to key questions 27 and 28, quoted below, as a means of protest:

27. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?

28. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization?

Others, however, were willing to demonstrate their Americanness at all costs. When Washington decided to segregate “loyals” from “disloyals”, one way the former could prove their patriotism was by volunteering to enlist in the army. In “Recruiting Team” Yamada refers to those army recruiters who went to the relocation camps to make clear that “one democratic right had been restored: the right to be shot at” (Weglyn 1996: 136). The poem ends with the ironic, desperate stanza:

Why should I volunteer!  
I'm an American  
I have a right to be  
Drafted. (Yamada 1984: 23)

During the first stages of evacuation many believed that by collaborating they would convince the authorities of their loyalty. In *Obasan* Naomi's other aunt, Emily, a Nisei activist, criticises such an attitude: “What a bunch of sheep we were. Polite. Meek. All the way up the slaughterhouse ramp. Why in a time of war with Germany and Japan would our government seize the property and homes of Canadian-born Canadians but not the homes of German-born Germans?” (Kogawa 1981: 38). Similarly, Yamada, who was educated in the United States, highlights in “Warning” what seemed to be an erroneous attitude on the part of most Japanese Americans. It is also a manifest of the culturally opposite Japanese and American values:

The voice of my father came to me  
from a corner of his cell  
(marked Dangerous Enemy Alien)

Do not sign your legal name  
to anything not  
on petitions for any cause  
in the street  
at meetings or rallies  
not on receipts for orders,  
special deliveries or C.O.D.s

I was my father's daughter  
I had followed his advice assiduously  
never left my thumbprints anywhere  
never gave my stamp of approval  
to anything



never cast my soulprint in cement  
 never raised my voice on billboards  
 and one day disappeared anyway  
 behind barbed wires.  
 They put up a sign on buildings  
 telephone poles and store fronts:  
 For all person who never left a mark.

“My silences had not protected me”. (Kim et al. 1997: 89)

Kogawa also condemns those silences in her novel, silences that did not prevent the United States or Canadian governments from carrying out their policies. Instead, they perpetuated the sufferings of those who underwent these experiences as Naomi. At the beginning of the novel silences prevent her from dealing with her past and therefore from facing the future as long as that past continues shaping her life. As aunt Emily retorts, “The past is the future” (Kogawa 1981: 42).

Emily represents those outraged Nisei who refused to let the past rest until the Canadian government apologised and recognised the crimes committed towards the Issei and Japanese Canadians. This leads Uncle Nakane to consider them “muzukashi,” that is, “difficult people” and “not very Japanese-like”. Aunt Emily reacts by asking why should Nisei be Japanese-like when they are Canadian (36-40). This last meeting of Naomi’s aunts and uncle before his death reflects the antagonisms between the first and second generations. Uncle insists: “In the world there is no better place [...] This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude” (42). This stoical attitude on the part of the Issei is symbolised in the bread that uncle Nakane has never learnt to cook properly. It is so hard that even he calls it “stone bureddo” (13). According to Cheng Lok Chua, such an oxymoron is “not only a metaphor for hardship endured” but also for the “unspeaking silence adopted by the Japanese Canadians (and Naomi) towards their victimization” (1992: 104).

One of the consequences of the relocation experience upon the Nisei was their total rejection of their Japanese cultural background. This “impossibly binary demand,” using Lisa Lowe’s expression, of complete, unquestioned assimilation, on the one hand, and repudiation of anything Japanese on the other, leads to the fragmentation of the subject (1995: 57). This is reflected in *Obasan* by Kogawa’s use of a non-linear structure –the novel constantly moves back and forth in time– and in the combination of a variety of genres. Initially, the text uses a diary format, which later on is combined with the epistolary form when Emily keeps a diary as letters written to her sister, Naomi’s mother, who returned to Japan just before Pearl Harbour to look after her sick grandmother. Kogawa also uses newspaper articles to refer to historical data and to the mood of the times so as to provide the reader with the necessary background information. For the same reason she also cites, through Emily, official letters and other historical documents stating the policy of the Canadian government on evacuation and relocation. The sense of fragmentation is further enhanced by Naomi’s recollection of her disturbing dreams, especially those concerning her absent mother, which she confuses with her own memories. It could be argued that

Yamada uses a similar formal technique in her poetry characterised by irregular structures, lack of rhyme and sudden changes in rhythm produced by the use of run on lines. Fragmentation is visually reflected on the page by the combination of short and long lines –sometimes consisting of a single word– and by different indentations within the same stanza.

The splitting of the subject became even more acute with the requirement of the Loyalty Oath. The community began to be dismantled prior to evacuation with the arrest of its leaders and outstanding members who could play such a role. The War Relocation Authority, the civil body in charge of the internment camps, purposely disrupted the traditional structure of the Japanese community. Issei and Kibei were unqualified to be representatives for each block to the community council since only unsuspected U.S citizens could fulfil the requirements –the Nisei. As they were encouraged to report on the activities of Issei and Kibei, that is, of their elders and siblings, the drifting apart of family members became almost inevitable. Issei men became increasingly frustrated for what they saw as their failure to protect and look after the family, enforced by their lack of power versus the Nisei within the camps. Tensions reached a breakpoint with recruitment and resettlement policies.

Yamada exemplifies these internal divisions in two poems, “The Question of Loyalty” and “The Night Before Good-bye”. In the first poem Yamada reflects her willingness to recover freedom by forswearing allegiance to the Japanese emperor:

For me that was easy  
 I didn't even know him  
 but my mother who did cried out  
 If I sign this  
 What will I be?  
 I am doubly loyal  
 to my American children  
 also to my own people.  
 How can double mean nothing?  
 I wish no one to lose this war.  
 Everyone does.  
 I was poor  
 at math.  
 I signed  
 my only ticket out (1998: 29).

Unlike her mother, who did not answer affirmatively to questions 27 and 28 of the “Application for Leave Clearance,” Yamada attempts to renounce her cultural background and therefore part of herself as many other Nisei. Her “only ticket out,” as a justification for her decision, was enabled by nongovernmental organisations such as the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council which tried to persuade educational institutions to accept Nisei students. Between 1942-46 it provided aid to 4,084 Nisei to continue their studies outside the camps (Matsumoto 1989: 118).

The poem also reflects the in-between situation and divided feelings of the Issei. The attitude of Yamada's mother expresses Kitagawa's theory that the majority of Issei "regarded Japan as their 'mother' and the United States as their 'mother-in-law'". As Kim explains:

Just as the Japanese daughter bids farewell to the home of her childhood and cleaves to her in-laws's home when she marries, the Japanese immigrant felt he must cleave to his adopted land and endure whatever abuse or hardship he encountered. At the same time, like the Japanese bride, he could never stop loving and longing for the childhood home that had been left behind. (Kim 1982: 126)

In "The Night Before Good-bye" Yamada continues to deal with the disruption of the family and consequently with each of its members, trying to view it from her mother's perspective:

Her husband taken away by the FBI  
 one son lured away by the Army  
 now another son and daughter  
 lusting for the free world outside.  
 She must let go.  
 The war goes on (1988: 30).

In *Obasan* Naomi and her brother Stephen have different attitudes towards their imposed fragmentation. At the beginning of the novel Naomi shows reluctance towards Aunt Emily's activism and insistence on remembering the past. At a given moment she states that those "who talk a lot about their victimization make me uncomfortable. It's as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind. From my years of teaching I know it's the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain" (Kogawa 1981: 34). It is interesting to notice that she is unable to apply this knowledge to herself.

Stephen's reaction is blunt rejection of everything Japanese. Being the older he is the one who experiences racism at school as a consequence of Pearl Harbour. Unlike Naomi, he refuses to eat the Japanese food Obasan prepares for him and carries in his lunch-box peanut-butter sandwiches. His hostile attitude to his Issei aunt is due to the fact that she represents Japanese values –it is not by chance that she is referred to as "Obasan" in Japanese and not as "aunt," like Emily who is Nisei. As an adult he uses his successful career as a pianist to stay away from his family as much as possible. When he returns for his Uncle's funeral, Naomi notices that he "has made himself altogether unfamiliar with speaking Japanese" (231). This disruption of the self is symbolised by his limpness for almost all the relocation period.

It is relevant here to refer to Margaret Atwood's theory that the central symbol of Canadian literature is the "multi-faceted and adaptable idea" of survival, not only in its literal meaning but also as cultural survival. She relates this concept to Canada's past as a colony and therefore as a construction of itself as a victim. This in turn is applicable to the minorities which form part of Canada today. Atwood identifies four "victim positions." The first one consists of denying or silencing one's situation as a victim. In the second phase one acknowledges his/her victim position, merely assuming it. The third phase

consists of fighting back the assumption of such a role and the final phase is actually the one occupied by ex-victims, since the external and internal (psychological) causes of victimisation have been removed. At the beginning of the novel Naomi is in stage one, but through aunt Emily's insistence and fight in not letting her forget her past and accept her victimisation, she is on her way to achieve the final stage by the end of the novel.

Kogawa and Yamada are also on their way to achieve that final stage through their creative writing. For Yamada, as she expresses in *Where I Stay*, the next generations will be like lichens, able to combine two cultures to create and contribute to something new thanks to the efforts of their elders:

While we sleep in our tents  
tightly zipped in  
and together  
new generations of  
lichens spill over  
on sandblasted rocks  
like orange marmalade  
storm-bearing westerlies  
whip fireflies  
flitting outside  
our nylon walls.

Between the  
host culture and us  
there is only time  
and patience for  
lichens slowly release  
corroding chemicals  
on resisting floors.

Volcanic mass turns to soil  
one grain at a time  
enough for pioneer moss  
and fledging ferns to  
make our desert lawn. ( 1988: 7)

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