

Trauma at the Intersection of Precarity and the Politics of Language: Exploring Memory and Manipulation in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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ABSTRACT

*The process of retrieving information in memory allows humans to recall and forget things. It is an active approach to determining our mutable identity, as memory never remains static. But what occurs if this dynamic process of iteration and interaction becomes fixed and fails to establish a rapport based on sympathy and solidarity with non-Western 'others?' This paper investigates the intricate relationship of language, memory, trauma, and power, particularly focusing on the precarity induced by the manipulation of language in the context of historical and political narratives. Apropos how such manipulation can also distort collective memory and ignite trauma; shaping perceptions and moulding societal narratives. Through an examination of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and by employing theoretical frameworks such as Freud's concept of "screen memories" and Deumert's notion of "scripts of supremacy," the paper examines the intersection of precarity and the politics of language. Additionally, it investigates the concept of "Historiographic Metafiction", as proposed by Hutcheon, highlighting the fusion of history and fiction in preserving collective memory and aiding in the process of healing from trauma. Thus, the main objective of this study is to critically examine how language manipulation distorts collective memory and triggers trauma, emphasising how literature functions as a corrective tool and a representation of cultural memory to counteract this precarity, navigate power dynamics, and preserve collective memory.*

Keywords: language; manipulation; politics; precarity; screen-memory; trauma

INTRODUCTION

"Precarity percolates neoliberal ideologies and practices, thus asking us to rethink about the urgency to constitute new forms of social contracts" (Dwivedi, 2023, p. 31). The precarity of language through manipulation is a concept that searches into the fragility and vulnerability of language when it is used in ways that distort or manipulate its intended meaning. Language manipulation can occur through various mechanisms such as propaganda, gaslighting, doublespeak, euphemisms, and linguistic framing since, like entwined vines, memory, politics, and language have long had a close bond. In politics, collective memory influences things from top to bottom. When public figures make statements that bring certain events into the national consciousness while erasing or silencing others, language becomes precariously situated and vulnerable. According to Verovšek (2020), societies harness and preserve the constructive power of memory through formal institutions and laws as well as through informal norms and traditions. This leads to a discussion of historical crises as the foundation for a constructive understanding of memory that builds on the concept of rupture. However, it does have the remarkable capacity to describe the world around us and to weave the intricate threads of social relationships. However,

in its duality, language also wields the potential for the exercise of power, making it a potent instrument in the hands of those who seek to manipulate the macro and micro memory, the root of which is language, and depriving the liberation of which could ignite trauma. It might illustrate how, in the hands of the wrong, language becomes more than just an objective observer through constructive language manipulation, especially during times of widespread uncertainty. As argued by Silverman (2020), there has been a strong correlation between trauma and cultural memory studies regarding the way horrific events, particularly acts of extreme violence, have been linked to past genocides, slavery, colonisation, and the Holocaust. In these moments of collective uncertainty, history becomes not merely a passive bystander; it transforms into a formidable player in the theatre of politics. It is summoned and shaped by those in positions of authority to influence views, reshape communities, and activate trauma by robbing people of their truths. When it comes to traumatic memories, the brain's normal functioning is disrupted by shock and emotional loss, which disrupts one's creative psyche. Such deprivation of one's freedom of language can lead to profound trauma, trapping individuals in a torturing search for self-narrative and risking the perpetual danger of never fully discovering their authentic identity. As Janet (1925) argues, "the renowned moralists of antiquity consistently highlighted how certain events would imprint lasting and troubling memories on individuals, memories that would persistently haunt them both day and night" (p. 589).

Language, in turn, interlaces these memories into narratives that transcend the realm of personal into the political and social. Such force, when wielded judiciously, casts a clarifying light on age-old conflicts. Language is the alchemist's tool, transmuting raw recollections into eloquent tales that resonate through the multiplicity of history by counteracting the precarity induced by the distortion of language. In this revelation, we uncover not just the darkness of manipulation but also the radiance of truth(s), though elusive, is the compass by which we navigate the tumultuous seas of history. This constant interaction or interstitial relationship between collective and private, micro and macro cultural understanding of trauma and memory, is where literature becomes an important platform. According to Kathryn Robson (2004), literature has become "a quest for self-expression, to break out of silence, be it via fiction, autobiography, or hybrid forms of both" (p. 14). Though the question might arise as to whether any work of fiction is eventually a work of cultural production reflecting the experiences of an individual or collective, the authenticity of the truth again remains vague, but to answer this is why literature will be the mighty sword for the oppressed against the privilege's practice of power. Literature, with its artistic power of language, remains free from the constraints of closure. Thus, locating the text is necessary to understand the narrative or the characters, which might lead to distinct kinds of viewpoints in terms of the politics of illustration, including ways to comprehend how the vulnerability of language has been used and the precarious effect it causes. Concerning the ambiguity of language with memory and trauma necessitates recognizing that forgetting, with its varied forms, plays a crucial and multifaceted role in shaping cultural memory and identity (Connerton, 2008). Reconnoitering what and how we forget reveals the compelling role of language, showing that forgetting often becomes a culturally constructed, politically and ideologically motivated act of production, generating precarity in both collective and intimate spaces. In employing the term "screen memories," Freud (1914) captured the concept of mind, processing the unprocessed, seeing the visible in the invisible, and filtering the unconscious with the conscious. However, when seen through a postcolonial lens, it symptomatically becomes a tool for exposing what has not yet been covered behind the hierarchical screen. These histories, by "writing out" or "whitewashing" uncomfortable incidents,

whether they pertain to slavery, colonialism, genocide, or the mistreatment of minorities, can be aptly described through this lens.

Debunking the myth of truth and uncurtaining history with biased truth or agency, this article aims to focus on the obligation of closely reading cultural and literary texts. In this case, Japanese Canadian author Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, originally written in 1981, brings out the diverse history against its manipulative linguistic power and memory with its aspect of what has been remembered and what has been made to be remembered with a fuller understanding of vulnerable cultural memory through the stories and gaps left behind. Drawing parallels between history and fiction, this study reflects how Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* becomes a scorching example of the power of fiction to narrate those voices which have been silenced, absent, and shut out in the equation of culture and imperialism. Using Freud's theory of 'Screen memory' (1914), Anna Deumert's (2018) "scripts of supremacy" and "scripts of servitude" (p. 193) refer to how voices and discourses are subjected to ideological erasure and dominance, especially in tales where affect and emotion are essential to capitalism, this paper will highlight a more intricate political relationship in which people and groups work together to negotiate truth(s) against the backdrop of absolute truth, which frequently leads to the creation of fictitious stories with polyphonous interruptions. This aligns with Hutcheon's concept of "Historiographic Metafiction" (1988), where language and history merge to create inherently fictional writings as our imagination and cognitive forgetfulness fill in the gaps. Ultimately, this paper's objectives are to show how fragmented storytelling in *Obasan* represents forgotten memories, using language as a tool for both the hierarchy and the helpless, aiding in healing from trauma.

ONTOLOGY OF MEMORY AND MEMORY STUDIES

At a fundamental level, memory operates through different degrees, primarily through three stages: encoding, consolidation, and retrieval. So, the brain force encodes information, as when you see something happening in front of you, and if the brain remembers it, it will begin to encode it. The neutral encoding will happen in your brain. Further, the encoding, if it becomes long-term, will start to consolidate, and then the act of remembering will happen, which is the retrieval (it is a three-tier phase). Now, even a very cursory glance at this memory model would reveal that this is a very slippery process. So, the moment there is something that has been encoded, it is also a reminder that something has also been decoded. Hence, every act of encoding also entails an active exclusion. Drawing a map of the memory lane has required a lot of work, focusing on the intersection of cartography and memory. Of course, the entire partition research can be read in this manner, outlining the landmasses that are included and excluded and ways in which these actions of forgetting and remembering happen around spatial lines. So, the vital thing to consider is that in every act of remembering or encoding, acts of decoding also lie. As Ricoeur (2004) highlights, the fundamental questions remain concerning 1) how an absent past can come to life in the present as memories, 2) how our concepts of historical truth are shaped by the elusive nature of memory, and 3) how it is inevitably necessary to forget and to (re)-remember.

Now, how does memory interact with history? To answer to this, through an interdisciplinary field, drawing on cognitive and theoretical psychology, even philosophy, memory understands the psychological relationship through different narrations and representations. It involves critically examining how memory is used to legitimise present authorities and deconstructs grand narratives and national mythologies (Sigrid et al., 2020). The spectacles of

memory both create and explore new voids, exacerbating social divisions. Thus, memory studies paradoxically involve both remembering and forgetting.

However, what occurs when this complex memory phenomena are used as a platform for political manipulation? Here, powerful groups think of “screen memory” as a technique to cover up false histories, divert attention from their own wrongdoings, and preserve the status quo. Peter Novick contends in *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999) that the United States’ fixation on the Holocaust diverts attention away from more troubling events in its own history, including the Vietnam War and racism against Blacks and Indigenous people. This hierarchy enchanter conjures an illusion, a narrative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Precarity refers to a state of insecurity or instability in various aspects of life, often related to economic, social, or employment conditions. It is commonly used to describe situations where individuals or groups lack stable and predictable resources or opportunities, making them vulnerable to sudden changes or crises. As Dwivedi (2023) argues, precarity is a widespread condition affecting both the Global North and South, but its impacts are more acute in the Global South due to its historical context of colonial exploitation and the weakening of social welfare systems by state actors. Such statements clearly indicate that precarity in society mostly deals with a hierarchy that exerts its power over the marginalised but is more focused on the dominant neoliberal ideology of recent times, emphasising cost-benefit analysis and viewing humans as mere economic units who are subjected to unstable work conditions and the lack of protective norms, all to sustain extractive economies. Martha Albertson Fineman offers a perceptive examination of human susceptibility, emphasising that reliance is an inherent aspect of human nature. She accentuates the significance of admitting this dependence as well as the necessity of connections and social structures. These frameworks aid in the development of resilience, allowing us to survive and even thrive despite our innate weaknesses (Fineman, 2022 online). Though the critics provide a compelling analysis of precarity, historical and systemic factors contributing to vulnerability, particularly in the Global South, are emphasised.

But while establishing the solution, they often forget how language becomes the source of such practices, and by neglecting the role of language, the scholars might have failed to address how linguistic manipulation normalises instability and obscures the need for collective action and social support systems. According to LeDoux’s (2003) reconsolidation model of memory, each act of remembering revises the memory, incorporating new information or interpretations. This highlights memory’s dynamic nature and its susceptibility to change. Language plays a crucial role in this process, serving as a medium for creativity and reinterpretation. As Clark and Chalmers (1998) points out, the concept of the Four ‘E’, *Embedded, Extended, Embodied, and Enactive*, significantly defines the notion of us being a biosocial entity. Cognition is an embodied phenomenon continuously shaped by the dynamic interplay between the brain and the surrounding social and discursive apparatus, forming an ongoing process of becoming, unbecoming, and rebecoming. Without the ability to rescript memories through language formed in social contexts, trauma can profoundly overtake, leaving the individual and collective in a loop of horror. As individuals lose the capacity to reshape their recollections, the traumatic experience remains ‘unspeakable’ (Caruth, 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992; J. Herman, 1997; Leys, 2000). In such cases, hierarchical power structures can dominate, suppressing individuality and controlling memory

narratives, where important aspects of memory are being replaced by seemingly trivial ones, which Freud analysed with childhood memories as “screen memories” (Freud, 1978, p. 237). This manipulation underscores how essential language is in maintaining personal agency and resilience against trauma. In a globalised and biopolitical context, critics argue that political forces have overtaken the biological aspects of memory, rendering the extraction of forgotten memories nearly impossible. Dominick LaCapra, referencing Albert Camus’s *La Chute/The Fall*, asserts that focusing on past events can act as a screen, obscuring the significance of recent, more urgent events and highlighting the inadequacy of our responses to them (LaCapra, 1998, pp. 73-74). This perspective underscores the manipulation of memory by political power, which prioritises certain narratives while concealing others.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a blended theoretical framework comprising Freudian screen memory, Deumert’s notion of “scripts of supremacy,” Hutcheon’s concept of “historiographic metafiction,” and key aspects of trauma theory to explore the intersection of precarity through language distortion, homogeneity of memory, trauma, and the power-powerless dichotomy within *Obasan*. The methodology is as follows: Firstly, the dynamic process of memory retrieval and forgetting, which shapes mutable human identity, is examined alongside the effects of fixed memory processes that lack empathy and solidarity with non-Western ‘others.’ Then, an analytical study of *Obasan* reveals how language manipulation is the root cause of these issues. The linkage between biased narration and static traumatic memory becomes apparent, leading to the development of a conceptual framework that combines trauma studies and precarious screen memory. This framework is then applied to analyse each traumatised victim in the text to address the research question: To what extent have they succeeded or failed in utilising the fusion of history and fiction where language acts as a tool for precarity and power for both the power and powerless in view of the preservation of collective memory?

OBASAN AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY AND LANGUAGE

Obasan by Joy Kogawa explores what has been remembered and forgotten through its most conventional narrative forms. It tells the story of Canada’s internment and ostracism of Japanese Canadians during WWII through the eyes of Naomi (a third-generation victim). Both aunts (Aunt Emily and Aya Obasan), belonging to the first generation, contribute to Naomi’s continuous existential crisis during her internment. The novel is the epitome of historiography with its trauma narrative shifting from child Naomi to adult Naomi, also with personal anecdotes to historical facts as Kogawa herself acknowledges that “this novel is based on historical events and many of the person’s names are real” (2012, Prologue). She has incorporated numerous materials sourced from the Public Archives of Canada. In Aunt Emily’s Diary, she includes direct quotes detailing events as they unfolded. As a scenario, she cites the April 1946 memorandum that the cooperation committee on Japanese Canadians submitted to the Canadian House and Senate, which exemplifies the government’s repatriation stance and states, “It is urgently submitted that the Orders-in-Council for the deportation of Canadians of Japanese racial origin are wrong and indefensible and constitute a grave threat to the rights and liberties of Canadian citizens” (p. 201). However, in this

journey of the historiographic route, one should mention how history is perceived and thought about, as every epistemic knowledge constitutes cultural manipulation and predilections. An awareness of history itself being constructed is always there. Everyone holds different stories; they intersect with one another, juxtapose with one another, and sometimes follow each other, resulting in collective truth or history; as Foucault calls it, “the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information” (Foucault, 1995, p. 52). Thus, the notion of history being textualized or trying to articulate absolute truth indicates an intersection between absence and presence. Gabriele Schwab (2010) suggests that the transmission of trauma requires understanding the unconscious processes of repression, splitting, and displacement, where many truths are suppressed intentionally. Such awareness of the violation of truth reveals that ‘history is peculiar to one another,’ resisting simplification as memory and its retrieval are encoded and decoded differently for everyone. *Obasan* becomes a statement of the unsayable in the face of the fabrication of political truths that the Canadian government wished to screen. The real reason for the evacuation and exile of Japanese Canadians during World War II was a government that was complicit and paranoid. This government made up the story that people of Japanese ancestry constituted a serious armed threat to Canada under the pretext of preserving national security. It is crucial to remember, too, that during the war, not a single accusation of treachery against Japanese Canadians was ever proven. Different versions began to emerge with various perceptions of truth and literature, which posed an encoding transforming tool of metafiction that draws attention to the subverted for the special purpose of mutable and exploited nature of truth or history. As Hutcheon (2003) suggests, dichotomies remain unresolved, yet each undergoes interpretation in the reimagining of art. It’s worth noting that both fiction and history possess fluid boundaries. Consequently, they have traversed diverse flights within sociological discourse.

Aunt Emily’s diary operates within a larger socio-political environment that may be understood using Deumert’s theories of capitalism and psycho-political linguistics as a guide (Deumert, 2018). According to Deumert, affective regimes and capitalism are closely related, with affect and emotions being essential to the maintenance of capitalist systems. The way the government uses language to support discriminatory policies against Japanese Canadians is an example of the emotive aspects of power, in which language manipulation is used to uphold oppressive hierarchies and continue oppression. Deumert’s idea of “scripts of servitude and supremacy” (p. 193) also aligns with Aunt Emily’s account of the experiences of Japanese Canadians. The expectations placed on marginalised populations by the scripts of colonial-capitalist oppression serve to maintain exploitation and dominance regimes. Aunt Emily’s painstaking research reflects her efforts to expose the hidden realities underlying governmental policies and to refute the official narrative. She takes out every possible evidence in the form of paper or letters to bring out the use of power and its manipulative language to ‘disguise any crime’ (p. 33), how the government has used constructive linguistic strategy. She holds a paper of “a man who was looking for the source of the problem in the use of language. Do you know what prison they sent us to? The government called them “Interior housing projects” (p. 33). Language, when dictated, results in a heavy destruction of the lively memory structure of the individual as well as the collective from generation to generation. The tension between factual investigation and narrative construction, as described by Hayden (1990) as the duality of “science” and “art,” characterises the historian’s dual roles of inquiry and storytelling. The entire bio-political nature of memory, both embedded and extended, can be seen as inhabited and exhibited through a unique privileged combination of language and representation. Emily, in her repeated troll on the history,

draws attention to how the “The Nisei will be ‘compelled’ (news report) to volunteer in Labour Gangs” (p. 75) and how none of them escaped naming. They were defined and identified by the way we were seen. A newspaper in B.C. headlined: “They are a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada” (p. 97).

Aunt Emily’s meticulous documentation of discriminatory policies and linguistic manipulation reflects her trauma, as she remains trapped in a memory circling, continuously exposing past injustices to challenge official narratives. This relentless focus on historical wrongs reveals her deep-seated need to validate Japanese Canadians’ experiences and counteract the erasure of her community’s suffering. This eventually leads Naomi to reinterpret her childhood events as misconceptions, analysing her past through her own lens of present and absent memories, distinct from Aunt Emily’s perspective. The term “Protected Area” ironically symbolises manipulation, contrasting the screen of caring by Canadians with the harsh reality of Japanese Canadians’ suffering, where the internment camp is remembered as a concentration camp. This impression of the ambivalent screen fits with the mechanisms of trauma, as Silverman contends (2020, p. 127), “how everyday things, places can act out hidden wounds from the past - and with artistic expressions that try to make sense of the paradox of revealing the unseen.”

“Sick Bay [at the internment camp] . . . was not a beach at all. And the place they called the Pool was not a pool of water but a prison at the exhibition grounds called Hastings Park in Vancouver. Men, women, and children outside Vancouver, from the “protected area?”

(p. 77)

Such distortion of truth painfully underscored the trauma with life-affirming water and sea metaphors. The forced relocation inland, away from the sea, intensifies their pain as they are uprooted from the environment that defines their sense of home and happiness. Uncle Isamu’s (Obasan’s Husband) annual pilgrimage to the coulee, reminiscent of the ocean, highlights the family’s longing for their lost connection to the sea. Despite finding some solace in the coulee, it remains a pale imitation of the vastness and depth of the ocean, underscoring the profound loss experienced by the family. Moreover, even though Deumert writes (2022), “the affective nature of capitalism is not a result of post-Fordist precarity (part-time employment and temporary contracts in labour markets signify increased vulnerability and job insecurity) and austerity politics” (aimed at reducing public spending, often exacerbates social misery and economic inequality by disproportionately cutting welfare and services for already marginalised groups), (p. 185) but the analysis expressively illuminates the intersection of austerity politics and post-Fordist precarity, underscored by the tormenting ordeal of Japanese Canadians during World War II—a poignant manifestation of capitalism’s impact. As economic systems shift, post-Fordist precarity is evident, with flexible but insecure forms of work replacing stable Fordist models. Naomi’s family’s trauma is intensified by their haunting memories of once-secure professions, as their descent into precarious labour under the racist Barker family starkly exposes systemic injustices and forces them into a dependence that highlights the brutal inequalities of social and racial structures, as Kasmir (2018) pointed out “precarity is experienced by marginalised, poor, and disenfranchised people who are exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration” (p. 2).

The internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II is shown by Kogawa in a way that speaks to the larger social inequities of post-Fordist precarity and austerity politics. Reminiscent of a lost maritime history, Naomi and Uncle Isamu’s treks to the coulee demonstrate how trauma and memory meld together, and through such outings, their memory tries to both

channel and reconstruct their past. Failing to integrate fixed trauma with previously discussed forgetting and *chunking*, as D. Herman (2013) notes, leads individuals to cyclically revisit old wounds without progress or hope for renewal. Trauma here is conveyed through the poignant juxtaposition of the serene, timeless landscape and the characters' personal struggles, "Nothing changes ne" (p. 8) as Naomi, still confused, asks, "Why do we come here every year?" (p. 9). Yet this work does highlight the need for inclusive storytelling and historical reckoning by illuminating the long-lasting effects of systematic oppression. The tenacity of marginalised people in the face of hardship with its relationship of political beliefs, lived experiences, and economic institutions by posing questions about trauma, memory, and resistance, since through the communal experiences of baths and pools, the novel underscores the resilience and fraternity among the marginalised. At the same time, the symbolism of 'Sick Bay' and the penalisation of Japanese Canadian culture highlights how trauma through manipulated memory exposes the broader critique of marginalised experiences in dominant narratives, reflecting the powerlessness of those with no political voice. As Craps denotes, imperialism has been publicised over trauma by the Western, where precarity of language elongating and screening through social structure significantly impacted the Japanese Canadian community:

"They tend to devalue or neglect the experiences of non-Western or minority civilisations; they favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma; and they ignore the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas."

(Craps, 2013, p. 2)

The erasure and silencing of the traumas endured by Japanese Canadians because of government actions not only form individual scars but also constitute a cultural wound; argued by Wood (2014), "trauma is not only an individual experience; it has a social and historical dimension" (p. 20). This shared trauma is buried under the label of 'Others,' highlighting the precariousness and social injustice inflicted on an entire refugee nation.

TRUTH AS MULTIFACETED ENTITY

The novel instigated light on the non-authoritative value of legal documentation and how textual remembering and forgetting defies an idea of hierarchy, bringing two sides to each coin, that the authority should rely on personal narratives and memory. Here, literature becomes the locus for displaying different hidden screens, one after another. With its mixing of different forms of materials, narrative and memory, it celebrates the interiorisation of thought differences. This mutilated problematic memory by the official Canadian discourse destroyed the Japanese community and their sense of belonging to Canada. This postcolonial approach to memory studies must begin by apprehending cosmological damage wrecked by colonial memory. D. Levy and Sznajder's (2006) work on the Holocaust as a "cosmopolitan memory" has been criticised for establishing the Holocaust as the sole standard for extreme violence; moreover, it neglects smaller yet equally significant histories with profound repercussion

In this case, to the Japanese people, it appears to be a kind of cultural and transgenerational trauma which they struggle to get over. They are stuck in a zone, tormenting generations after generations, and neither can they forget, nor do they want to remember. The Japanese community's transgenerational trauma, compounded by their forced relocation to Slocan and subjugation under propaganda, created a persistent sense of loss and displacement. This "inverse pioneer" experience emotionally and socially devastated them, disrupting Naomi's personal growth as she faced the

dehumanisation of racism and the trauma of her mother's unexplained disappearance, adding to the collective pain of her scattered community, "we are those pioneers who cleared the bush and the forest with our hands" (p. 92). Naomi's discomfort in social settings in her adult life, illustrated by her awkward interactions and self-deprecating humour, struggle with term like "spinster" reflects deep-seated trauma and a tenacious sense of identity conflict and social alienation. As stated by Hazer and Gredebäck (2023), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety are among the most prevalent and extensively researched mental health conditions within the refugee population. Naomi struggles to determine whether her memory and trauma truly belong to her Japanese heritage or her Canadian identity.

Thus, history is not just piecing together truth out of fragments; it remains miscellaneous for each person and society's memory as opposed to what the authority defines and screens about remembrances and forgetting. This novel poses as a 'historiographic metafiction' where each of the three women has their own way of visioning the truth, enduring and struggling with it, as seen in Aunt Emily, to counter racist propaganda, who developed her own language to combat the falsification of truth 'write the vision and make it plain' (p. 31). And she does exactly that by drifting the nation from the perspective of a "General Practitioner of Just Causes." While telling the Japanese Canadians' story, she inadvertently creates another exclusionary screen, presenting a partial truth as collective, and replicates the linguistic fallacy she aimed to critique, thereby trapping herself and forcing Naomi into a cycle of mimetic effect. "Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene" (47). This encapsulates different approaches to trauma in human behaviour and psychology.

Aunt Emily embodies the activist side of Kogawa, serving as a conduit for the author's own convictions and beliefs regarding the Japanese Canadian issue. Reading Aunt Emily's diary, Naomi clenches, realising Aunt Emily living a different life, where she was aloof from reality behind her, "Not seeing these" is why she was able "remained airborne" (p. 69) whereas others were in Slocan and the depressing ghost town Granton "One cannot know everything" (p. 43). Naomi confides in the history that she had seen with Obasan; she is certain about the past, and she does not succumb to Aunt Emily's desire to get included in her (Emily's) screen of memories and be a victim of another suppression. She recalls her different Christmas memory from Aunt Emily's: "It's the chicken coop "house" we live in that I mind" (p.159).

Aunt Emily's focus on modernist storytelling reveals her failure to grasp the postmodern complexity and layers of truths, as trauma overwhelms her creative notion of memory, with a lack of symbolisation and distortion in the form of traumatic latency and amnesia (Freud, 1914). As Deleuze (1985) argues, the picture allows the persistence of several temporal layers, or "sheets of pasts," and disturbs the linear flow of time. Traumatic exclusion from Canada made her Japanese picture fixed:

"For her [Emily], the vision is the truth as she lives it. When she is called like Habakkuk to the witness stand, her testimony is to the light that shines in the lives of the Nisei, in their desperation to prove themselves Canadian, in their tough and gentle spirit. The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey".

(p. 31)

For Naomi, the truth is more "shadowy and grey" (p. 31), with facts contradicting each other in an egregious way. On one hand, "in 1945, the gardens in Slocan were spectacular... on the other, families were already fractured and separated permanently destroyed by the evacuation from Slocan to the Prairies" (p. 183). Thus, the absence and presence in history work in both ways, authoritative and suppressed. And this reluctance to closure has a special relationship with the

literature it provides. A narrative with the aim of revision and recreation, without prioritising any experience as the model or the “it”. Rather, its focal point is to find the difficulty that language posits in making the historical experience the icon.

FORGETTING IS THE CREATION OF NEW REMEMBRANCE: DEFYING THE SCREEN

Now, forgetting and remembering remains a very complex task in cultural memory itself, as it dwells on private and discursive, collective and individual levels, connecting memory with a biopolitical entity. In the case of exile, memory becomes an impossibility that has yet to face and achieve various ontological unions through literature and its representation. In transcultural trauma studies, the question of forgetting has often been seen as a weapon of resistance. It is very crucial to see how certain groups and cultures refuse to remember certain events because it is too traumatic for them. But behind this forceful forgetting, there’s always a question of waiting. This prompts the question: Are silence and absence truly void, or do they hint at a more omnipresent presence or voice? Unlike Emily’s outspoken advocacy, Naomi’s other aunt, Obasan, is the epitome of using silence or forgottenness as resistance towards all that is raw and wrong. If Emily comes out as the word warrior, boldly speaking and deciding the right against the wrong, hoping for an entail that such voicing with emancipatory effects will bring, then Obasan is the counter account, who has become a stone lady by hiding the trauma within her. She has understood the distance that articulation can bring, with the language being a sign of loss. Thus, she takes on a stoic quality and does not surrender to language as she is afraid that language might transform and change the truth, of which she is only in power unless she speaks about it. Thus, she refuses to be a prey of verbal communication and writes her vision plain, unlike Aunt Emily.

In *Obasan*, the manipulative nature of language creates a barrier between experience and its narrative, with traumatic memory resisting cohesion and leaving the protagonist in enduring silence and forgetfulness. Giuseppe Craparo et al., in citing psychologist Pierre Janet (2019), stated that for a traumatic memory to become a narrative memory, there must be a clinical distancing before the subject ever speaks about it. Yet, Obasan’s silence also epitomises a vibrant Nisei culture, reflecting the proud Japanese side of Kogawa, where Obasan’s damaging stillness is intertwined with the beneficial application of silence, as exemplified by Naomi (Fujita, 1985).

“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”.

(p.17)

This very quality of using forgetfulness as a resistance power can also be seen in Naomi towards her realisation of how language can be used for wrongful means. A binary conflict of *remembering* + *speaking* and *forgetting* + *denying* becomes central to Naomi’s own traumatic overcoming through realising the supremacy of language. She grapples with her traumatic past and the desire for truth while resisting Aunt Emily’s dominant dialogue, struggling with forgetting and denial, and choosing to engage with her history through personal abstraction of language rather than straightforward speech; thus, she comments on Aunt Emily’s obsession with documents and her harsh traumatic memory, “what good they do, I do not know? Those little black typewritten words? 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. 189). Here, we highlight a creative tension when examining Aunt Emily’s approach to using language as a tool to bear witness to historical injustices, as well as the broader context of Afro-American literary criticism’s traditional mimetic

perspective, which may inadvertently reinforce the idea that literature can or should offer a complete and unerring reflection of reality. This overlooks the creative, subjective, and multifaceted nature of literary expression; as Tate (1986) contends, “Afro-American literary criticism has traditionally been mimetic, in that it has described, explained, and evaluated the degree to which a black literary text truthfully represents its cultural, social, and history” (p. 111). Thus, stretching the point that there’s a thin line between creating (i.e., constructing) and telling (i.e., expressing) individual histories.

Any approach to producing an absolute truth will mirror another mimetic notion of domination enforcing more precarity, where many traumas will remain unheard. Truth is always full of miscellaneous screens; thus, “All great fiction, to a large extent, is a reflection on itself rather than a reflection of reality” (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 12). Linda Hutcheon’s statement suggests that our understanding of reality is fundamentally shaped by language and discourse. Whether it’s personal history, public history, or fiction, they all rely on language to construct and convey meaning. This view underscores the idea that there is no ultimate truth; instead, all truths are mediated through language and interpretation. Similarly, metafiction begins with the assumption that we are forever locked in a “world shaped by language and subjective (i.e., fictional) developed to organise our relationship to the world in a coherent fashion” (McCaffery, 1980, p. 6). This point of view contests the idea that there is an objective reality, claiming that language and story constructions are always the means of mediation and filtering human understanding.

Thus, Naomi realises that using forgetting as resistance and not addressing the absence by remaining silent might only increase the danger of [an]other intergenerational rotation of silence and screen. Silence will bring the same possibility of distortive truth for the “one that cannot speak” or “that will not speak” (p. 7), which is exactly what her mother did, leaving her children in the dark about her disappearance, thinking that learning the truth will destroy them. But the literal silence regarding her mother’s past only made Naomi more and more restless and continued to haunt her later life, especially in the tranquillity of *Obasan*. All of this leads her to find the truth behind the screen and absence and acknowledge their presence in the macro worlds through her own micro understanding of dynamic linguistic discourse. She must transform her pain into the caution of both extremes. Now, she tells her story through her own way of remembering and understanding the past with her poetical and intertextual insertion to fill up the gaps brought by silence and the socio-political racist politics of dispersal.

Therefore, comes the main point; for example, if “art has always been subject to institutional limitations and constructions including the so-called autonomous modernist art,” it means it has never been autonomous (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 18), so traumatic overcome should also mediate through contextual forces. Children of transgenerational traumatic survivors always struggle to narrate what happened; they rely on their own understanding of culture and various resources, including works of literature, parables, fairy tales, legends, and research papers, “to make sense of the past and incorporate it into a personal history” (Skultans, 1998, p. 28). Unlike her aunts, who simply represented “milk and Momotaro” (52) in their individual disputes, she must symbolise the fundamental relationship of ‘milk with Momotaro.’ Naomi becomes an active reader of these documents, realising a past made of abundant truths. The use of fairy tales in *Obasan*, through intertextuality orientations, discreetly modifies our understanding of the narrator’s quest for self-identity within Canadian society. Like the structure of many fairy tales, *Obasan*’s narrative work is imbued with the timeless archetype of the quest for identity.

Through a reference to *Peter Pan* whose famous collar graces Naomi's white silk blouse, "My white silk blouse has a Peter Pan collar dotted with tiny red flowers" (p. 120), Kogawa's story highlights the crucial part that infancy had in Naomi's self-formation. Like Peter Pan, who is incapable of growing up, Naomi is prevented from fully developing her adult personality by the eerie recollections of her early years. The protective cocoon that Obasan and Uncle Isamu have created around her, keeping her safe from the terrible truth of her mother's fate in Nagasaki, further impedes her emotional development. Naomi's desire to learn about the adult world, from which she is excluded, is highlighted by *Peter Rabbit's* (1944) sudden appearance in Thornton Burgess's story. This initiation is withheld from her until the novel's conclusion when she discovers her mother's truth: "I am reminded of Peter Rabbit hopping through the lettuce patch when I hear Stephen's lopsided hop as he comes galloping down the stairs" (82). Naomi's psychological immaturity is further highlighted by a comparison to *Snow White* (1967) from the fairy tale; just as Snow White lives among the impressionable dwarves, Naomi, too, is caught in a vicious cycle of adult desires and childish fears. Within *Obasan*, the interweaving of fairy tale elements functions as a prism, bringing Naomi's identity crisis in a convoluted social environment to life and striking a chord with readers on both a narrative and symbolic level. The most significant intertext in the novel underscores this point, as Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (2003) particularly The Grand Inquisitor, serves as a profound medium to elucidate the meaning behind her mother's truth. Naomi has a terrifying dream at her uncle's funeral, in which she meets the Grand Inquisitor. Judgement and a lack of empathy are symbolised by the Grand Inquisitor's incessant interrogation of her mother. Recognising the myopia of this tragedy, Naomi proposes that listening to her mother is more effective than questioning her. She realises that she should have listened to her mother's unspoken words instead of demanding harsh answers. Following this realisation, Naomi starts to see her mother's silence as a sign of love and reassesses their bond with an intertextual portrayal of the Grand Inquisitor's repressive authority and hostility.

Hence, instead of demanding absolute truth, she forms her own without judging the silence or surrendering to words. As Derrida writes, the screen is not only just a tool for political and ideological manoeuvring but can be looked at as "a system of relations between strata" in a "radicalised" interpretation of Freud's ethereal writing pad. (Derrida, 1978, p. 227) This insertion of intertextuality in *Obasan* defies the precarity of language by expanding the narrative beyond its immediate confines and enriching it with layers of cultural, literary, and psychological significance. In the end, trauma-ridden Naomi, who is unable to completely forget, turns her story around on her own terms and finds herself to be one and integrated with her loved ones, as she now has all the answers to lots of unknown questions:

"Between the river and Uncle's spot are the wild roses and the tiny wildflowers that grow along the trickling stream. The perfume in the air is sweet and faint. If I hold my head a certain way, I can smell them from where I am".

(p. 200)

CONCLUSION

But the novel does not end with Naomi's history, but rather her story, serving as a paradoxical site of an absence presence akin to all the unheard memories behind the absolute screens, like national history itself, aligning closely with Freud's original description. This is where literature comes in with its unique potential to portray politics of memory, precarity, and vulnerability of language

and trauma-identity, showing how it can be discursive as well as subjective. This current study demonstrates literature's commitment to incorporating official text with fictional and poetic assessments and shows that seeking different perceptions of the past opens a portal of possibilities to know and recreate the unknown. In postmodern historiographic metafiction, memory productive and memory reflective are often juxtaposed, where even the silences like Obasanjo and *mute-speaker* like Aunt Emily might rethink their choices of voicing the unspeakable, with the trauma itself providing the very link between cultures (Caruth, 1991). Kogawa's *Obasan* comes out as a perfect example of the production of possibilities, denying closure to any statement and opening to themes and topics of discussion demanding a reaction to all that could have or would have with its fictional privilege of connecting and contesting memory.

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