

The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific War Depicted in Post-Redress Canadian Fiction

Yukiko TODA*

Abstract

Traditional immigrant stories written by ethnic minority writers depict struggles and conflicts that immigrants experience in their new cultural and social environment. Japanese Canadian author Joy Kogawa, for instance, recounts the story of Japanese internment during the Second World War in *Obasan* (1981). In this novel, Japanese Canadians are depicted as victims of the war, not only in Canada, but also in Japan through the portrayal of the protagonist's mother as victim of A-bombing in Nagasaki.

Since the end of the 20th century, many contemporary literary works around the world depict Japan's involvement in the Asia-Pacific War. This paper looks at, in particular, the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific War depicted in Asian Canadian prose fiction—Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushroom* (1994), Madeleine Thien's *Certainty* (2006), and Kerri Sakamoto's *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003). Interestingly, there is a shift in the ways these works depict Japan in the Asia-Pacific War published after 1988, the year when the Canadian government officially apologized to Japanese Canadians for the injustice done to them during the Second World War. During the Redress movement that led to this official apology, it was important to portray Japanese Canadians as harmless victims of the War in order to emphasize that they are “model citizens” and not “enemy aliens.” Works after Redress, however, capture Japan's colonial impact and its various effects from a more comprehensive, global perspective, which simultaneously taps into controversial issues that Japan has tried to “forget” or been reluctant to talk about.

I. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro in his Nobel Lecture reflects upon his realization that soon people who had witnessed the Second World War would not be alive, and says that as someone who had “at least

* School of Cross-Cultural Studies, Department of Foreign Studies

been brought up by parents whose lives had been indelibly shaped by them” have “a duty to pass on” the “memories and lessons” of WWII to the next generation (Ishiguro, “My Twentieth Century Evening” 23–24). Since then, Ishiguro says he had wanted to write a story that would explore the following questions concerning the collective war memory:

Does a nation remember and forget in much the same way as an individual does? Or are there important differences? What exactly are the memories of a nation? Where are they kept? How are they shaped and controlled? Are there times when forgetting is the only way to stop cycles of violence, or to stop a society disintegrating into chaos or war? On the other hand, can stable, free nations really be built on foundations of wilful amnesia and frustrated justice? (Ishiguro, “My Twentieth Century Evening” 25)

This attempt had culminated in his latest novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015), a story about war and collective amnesia. A mysterious “mist” sweeps over the country, causing memory loss, both short- and long-term. As it is revealed in the end, King Arthur has ordered his men to set the “mist” to maintain peace between the two tribes at war—the Britons and Saxons. The novel questions whether it is better to draw a veil over and forget the past (including the past mass massacre) or uncover “the buried giant” and face it. Although the novel is set in a fictional England sometime in the 6th century, Ishiguro says he had in mind more recent conflicts and the problem of “willful amnesia” including Japan in the Second World War.

Interestingly, many contemporary literary works around the world since the end of the 20th century depict Japan’s involvement in the Asia-Pacific War. These include Eng Tan Twan’s *The Gift of Rain*, Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), Kyoko Nakajima’s *The Little House* (2010), Kerri Sakamoto’s *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003), Rui Umezawa’s *The Truth About Death and Dying* (2002) to name a few. These authors, like Ishiguro, may have realized the responsibility to “uncover” the hidden past and pass on the lesson to younger generations. One significant factor that contributes to this global trend is human mobility. Like Kazuo Ishiguro, many authors of Japanese descent have immigrated to other countries. Another aspect that explains this situation is the postcolonial theory and perspective that have taken root in the latter part of the 20th century.

This paper looks at, in particular, the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific War depicted in contemporary Asian Canadian prose fiction—Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushroom* (1994), Madeleine Thien’s *Certainty* (2006), and Kerri Sakamoto’s *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003). Interestingly, there is a shift in the ways these works depict Japan’s involvement in WWII as published after 1988, the year when the Canadian government officially apologized to Japanese Canadians for the injustice done to them during the Second World War. During the Redress movement that led to this official apology, it was important to portray Japanese Canadians as harmless victims of the War in order to emphasize that they are “model citizens” and not “enemy aliens” as they had been branded at the time. Works after Redress, however, capture Japan’s colonial impact and its various effects from a more comprehensive, global perspective, which simultaneously taps into controversial issues that Japan has tried to “forget” or

been reluctant to talk about.

II. The Redress Movement and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, now widely read in universities across Canada, is considered one of the most important works of the Redress Movement, as it widely informed the Canadian public about the injustices done to Canadian citizens of Japanese ancestry during and after the War. Over 22,000 Japanese Canadians were dispossessed, removed from their homes, and sent to internment camps in the Canadian interior, away from the West Coast. The Redress Movement refers to a movement to put to right the injustices done against Japanese Canadians during World War II. Japanese Canadians asked for the restitution of civil rights, an official apology, and monetary compensation from the government.

Kogawa's *Obasan* recounts what happened to the Japanese Canadians during and after the war through the female protagonist, Naomi Nakane, who experienced the internment camp as a child. The narrative present is set in 1972, and Naomi, now a 36-year-old school teacher in Cecil, Alberta, recalls her childhood past during the war—her family's forced evacuation from their Vancouver home and her life in the internment camp in Slocan, British Columbia.

Secrets surround Naomi—there are so many things adults do not tell her. She often hears them whispering “*kodomo no tameni*” (*Obasan* 26, 263), but is unable to understand that they are trying their best not to upset or worry their children. One of the secrets kept from Naomi is about her mother, who was back in Japan to tend to her sick mother before the war started. Naomi has not heard from her mother since. Nobody around her mentions Naomi's mother. Only years after the war does Naomi learn that her mother, whom she had not heard from, had died from a severe injury caused by the bomb dropped on Nagasaki.

The vivid physical damage the A-bomb has had on Naomi's mother illustrates the devastating effects of the bomb. Naomi's mother was “utterly disfigured. Her nose and one cheek were almost gone. Great wounds and pustules covered her entire face and body. She was completely bald. She sat in a cloud of flies, and maggots wriggled among her wounds” (*Obasan* 286). Such depiction of Naomi's mother adds to the victimhood of Japanese Canadians in war, for they not only suffer in Canada but in Japan as well.

Setting the story in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and depicting the horrors of the A-bomb, however, hides other aspects of Japan's involvement in the Asia-Pacific War behind the mushroom cloud. Nagasaki and Hiroshima are chronotopes that emphasize Japan as a victim of war. During Redress, it was essential to emphasize and prove that Japanese Canadians had always been “model citizens,” and not aggressive “enemy aliens” as they had been labelled by the Canadian government and society during the war. It was clearly not a good idea to present Japan and Japanese as aggressive perpetrators, as well as to depict Japan's negative involvement in the Asia-Pacific War such as the Japanese invasion and occupation of other parts of Asia.

As Kerri Sakamoto explains, A-bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima is far from a comprehensive depiction of Japan's involvement in the Asia-Pacific War.

As Japanese Canadians, we are Canadian, but we still have a connection to Japan, and it is essential to appreciate the beauty of its traditions and its history. We also have to examine the less pleasant aspects of its history. In a way, we are in a position to contribute to the discussion at least in Canada and North America, because of our relationship to Japan. We are not Japanese, but we need to talk about it more. (emphasis added, Cuder-Dominguez 139)

Sakamoto here says that as a Japanese Canadian, she is in a position to write about “the less pleasant aspects of its history.” The works written by other Japanese Canadian authors reflect Sakamoto’s sentiment, as will be examined next.

III. Works After Redress *Hiromi Goto’s Chorus of Mushroom*

Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushroom* is about the lives of three generations of Japanese Canadian women—the grandmother Naoe, the daughter Keiko, and the grand-daughter Murasaki. The main story of the novel is not about war or Japan. However, the Japanese invasion and occupation of Manchukuo is mentioned through Naoe, the grandmother. Before immigrating to Canada with her daughter’s family, Naoe has lived in Japan and Manchukuo, a state in northeast China that was de facto controlled by Japan from 1932–1945. Naoe lived in Manchukuo for ten years with her husband who built bridges there.

In Canada, Naoe looks back on her past life in Manchukuo, and regrets not being able to see what was going on around her, and “of not having spoken, of not bothering to ask questions” (Goto 54). During the ten years Naomi lives there, she stays “behind the walls they built around the cities” (Goto 53), shutting herself out from the outside world and from reality.

Looking back decades later in Canada, she describes her husband Makoto as “proud and foolish” (Goto 53) for convincing himself that he was building bridges “for the betterment of the Chinese people. To aid in their development” (Goto 53), when in fact, he was building them “for Japanese soldiers to march across to kill their inland cousins” (Goto 54). Naoe, however, admits and regrets being a bigger “fool” than her husband, “for not uttering words of doubt. For not asking for another truth” (Goto 55). She never questioned what those bridges were really for, as well as about many other “ways” of life in Manchukuo.

I [Naoe] never questioned why the schools were made separate, why Chinese and Japanese were not taught together. Why Chinese children had to learn Japanese, but Japanese children were not taught the words of the land they lived in. Why there were servants in our modest homes while there were people starving outside the walls of the city. (Goto 54)

During her ten years there, Naomi never attempts to learn “Mandarin or Cantonese or any other dialect” (53). She never tries to learn her loyal Chinese servant boy’s name either. Even the simple act of asking his name did not cross her mind at the time. Naoe is not alone in not bothering to ask

for her servants' names. Naoe represents one of many Japanese people in Manchukuo at the time. Many people at the time accepted and did not question the status quo. Naoe's self-reflection and self-criticism are simultaneously critical of the Japanese occupation of Manchukuo, which was deeply rooted in racism.

IV. Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*

Another example that portrays this unpleasant chapter in the history of Japan is Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*—a story about the Japanese invasion and occupation of North Borneo and Indonesia. As the daughter of Chinese immigrant parents, Thien was eager to learn and write about the war in British North Borneo where her father was originally from. Japan invaded South East Asia in order to secure its abundant natural resources, in particular, oil. The “ABCD powers” (America, Britain, China, the Dutch) criticized Japan's war against China and imposed an embargo on oil and other resources such as rubber, iron ore, and steel. The Japanese government thus promoted the “advance south” policy. This novel illustrates the various impacts Japanese invasion and occupation have had on the lives of Japan's war victims in North Borneo and Indonesia. Through depicting various characters' experiences under Japanese rule in North Borneo and their aftermaths, the novel illustrates Japan's colonial impact, both direct and indirect, that extend over vast geographical space and through many generations.

The protagonist of this story, Gail Lim, who lives in contemporary Vancouver, for instance, is haunted by her father Matthew's past in Sandakan, Borneo. Matthew has grown up in Borneo during the Asia-Pacific War. Matthew's father assisted the Japanese army during the war in order to protect his family but is killed by the Japanese soldiers when the war ends. Matthew, then a young boy, witnesses his father's death: “Hidden in the trees, he had seen his father's death, watched as the body was thrown inside a truck, and the truck driven away” (Thien 127).

Although everything Matthew had loved and known was in Sandakan, he is unable to stay in North Borneo where people remember him as a son of a “collaborator” (Thien 49). Once, a young man who had lost his parents and sister in the war reproaches Matthew on the street—that Matthew had “no right to live amongst” them (Thien 166). Unlike other victims of the war, Matthew's father “had no grave in Sandakan, and his spirit floated untended, unmourned, except in Matthew's thoughts, and in those of his mother” (Thien 54–55). Matthew, realizing that “there was no place for” him in Sandakan (127), moves to Australia to study, and (because Australia at the time did not accept immigrants) to Canada as an immigrant.

Even after Matthew distances himself geographically away from Sandakan, however, he continues to be haunted by the memory of his father. Matthew tells his wife Clara that he had been wrong “to believe he could start over, leave Sandakan and all that happened there behind” (Thien 134).

His father lived on in his mind, a presence that shaped his thoughts. The way, when he rose from bed in the morning, his confidence seemed to make the house full. In the darkness, his

father would walk the aisles of the rubber plantation, he and the workers wearing headlamps or carrying torches, a stream of light illuminating the track ahead of them. How beautiful their home had been, on Jalan Campbell. There had been cabinets full of glass figurines and trinkets, pottery from China, painted fans. He remembered his parents dancing, the phonograph on the high shelf, music like a tent around them. Now Matthew was twenty-eight years old, the same age his father had been when he died. He said that he was losing his bearings, he did not know how to see into the future, how to become the man he wished to be. (Thien 134)

Matthew remembers his father as a proud, successful man, who lights the way for his family and his workers. Matthew, however, also remembers his father who collaborated with the Japanese, and because of this, no one “grieved” or showed respect when he died. Matthew is haunted by what he had witnessed as a young boy, and regrets not having done anything to save his father.

He [Matthew] is trying to hold on to his father’s voice, the face of his child, the days that marked the end of the war. Even now, too late, he imagines finding the way out. In his nightmares, he tries to tell his father that another path exists, that the centre of his self, the goodness that makes him whole, once lost, can never be recovered. (Thien 47)

Matthew is sorry that things have had to turn out the way it did for his father, and that his father has had to choose to assist the Japanese in exchange for his dignity. Sometimes in his dreams, Matthew is “telling him [his father] to escape, how to leave Sandakan” (Thien 169) but is unable to “reach him” (Thien 169). Matthew’s dream indicates his wish to change the past. Matthew faces the harsh reality that he simply cannot change the past, however much he wishes to alter it.

Matthew’s trauma deeply affects his daughter Gail as well. Gail has often “woken to the sound of her father’s nightmare” (Thien 211), and has seen him suffer insomnia and depression. Gail grows up trying to make sense of her father’s past. One could say that Gail’s entire life focuses on this mission. Gail is a producer of radio documentaries, and in one of the radio pieces, she attempts to decipher the coded diary left by a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese in Hong Kong. This POW was a Canadian soldier who had kept a coded diary while he had been detained. When he shows it to his family a couple of decades later in the 1960s, however, he has forgotten how to read his encryption. Gail’s interest, first of all in the topic, and her tenacious pursuit to decipher the code written by the POW soldier, indicate her adamant obsession to retrieve and make sense of the past, Japan’s occupation and the effects it had on her father, and ultimately herself.

Gail’s attempt to unravel her father’s traumatic past, which he refuses to disclose, leads her to meet the husband of Matthew’s childhood sweetheart Ani—Sipke Vermeulen in Holland. Gail learns from Sipke that Ani and Matthew’s relationship did not work out because there was no future for them in Sandakan where everyone knew Matthew’s father and what he had done during the war. Ani moves to Jakarta and raises their child without telling Matthew of its existence. Matthew visits Ani and their son Wideh in Indonesia several years later, only to realize once again that there is no

future for them together.

This novel thus illustrates how these wartime losses caused by the Japanese occupation cannot be forgotten or left behind. It affects Matthew and his family even after he immigrates to Canada. It leaves traces years later on Matthew's daughter, Gail, who has never even been to Borneo. The impact of the Japanese occupation lasts long after the war and covers a vast expansion of space—North Borneo, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Australia, Holland, and Canada.

V. Kerri Sakamoto's *One Hundred Million Hearts*

Kerri Sakamoto's *One Hundred Million Hearts* focuses on Japanese Canadians who fought for Japan in WWII. Although many writers in North America have been writing about the wartime experiences of Nikkei people, not much attention has been paid to Nikkei who were back in Japan, or who fought for Japan.¹

The father of the protagonist, Masao, is a Japanese Canadian who was studying in Japan when he was summoned to join the Special Attack Forces—a Unit that crashes their aircraft against Allied naval vessels. He returns to Canada after the war but leads a reclusive life there. Masao feels he does not belong anywhere—he was not interned like other Japanese Canadians, nor did he go back to stay in Japan as one of the repatriates when the war ended. Masao's daughter Miyo learns about her father's past only after his death. *One Hundred Million Hearts* reveals what the war had meant for Masao through his daughter Miyo, which simultaneously sheds light on what the war had meant for Japanese Canadians who fought for Japan.

The novel explores questions that Nikkei people have, which are sensitive questions that Japanese people often hesitate to ask. What was it that had led these Japanese university students to willingly sacrifice themselves? How and why did people at the time accept the Kamikaze code that considered death an honour, coming back alive shameful, worse than death? Did these young pilots ever waver between fear and obligation? How could mothers send their children to war, knowing that they would not come back?

The novel, just like Thien's *Certainty*, is recounted by the daughter of a father who is traumatized by the Asia-Pacific War. Through Miyo, this novel attempts to imagine and understand the mentality of these young elite university students who were expected to die for the country. Miyo's outsider position points out various contradictions about Japan during the war. Miyo, as an outsider, is able to freely question and explore controversial and sensitive issues. For example, Miyo questions why it is worse to come back alive than to die.

Miyo did not know until after her father's death that he was one of the Kamikaze pilots. She finds out that her father in fact had not been ready to die for the country's "Great Cause" like the rest of the Kamikaze pilots, and that Hajime, a friend who was stationed with him, dies replacing her father's turn. Miyo learns about her father's inner conflict from one of the letters Hajime has written to his fiancé Kiku:

Masao is afraid of death because he cannot bring himself to believe that he will flourish in the

afterlife.... He [Masao] says he is not a pure Japanese. He feels he stands apart from the others, along with his impure thoughts. He cannot be at the heart of the ignorant crowd, he says, though he longs to be one of the one hundred million who believe." (Sakamoto 264–65)

Masao cannot bring himself to believe that it is better to die than to surrender, or that he would be able to reunite with his family and friends in spirit at Yasukuni Shrine. Masao cannot understand why Hajime fears, more than death, to "die without fulfilling my [his] mission" (Sakamoto 264), to "disappoint or shame" his family.

The novel illustrates that it is not simply because Masao is Japanese Canadian that he had these mixed feelings of doubt, anxiety, and ambivalence. Although it is unlikely that letters indicating such feelings would be displayed in the museum in real life, Hajime's letters to Kiku show that he shared Masao's feelings, and that he was trying to suppress his doubt and make himself believe by boosting his morale. The novel also introduces a Japanese Canadian character who truly believed. Unlike Masao and Hajime, Buddy, or Koji Kuroda, believed that "Dying was lucky; was divine" (145) and it was "mottainai" that they did not send him off to die. By dying, Buddy hoped to prove that he "wasn't bottom of the heap, just some yellow skibby" (145). He wished to fight and even die if necessary for the Emperor to save Manchuria, a land he believed to be of "opportunity" and "racial equality" (141). While introducing these differences of views regarding "loyalty and honour until death" and enshrinement at Yasukuni, the novel criticizes the Japanese military-dominated structure of the state that manipulates its people for its means.

Moreover, by emphasizing the dreariness, emptiness, and "dankness" of the Yasukuni museum (Yushukan) where articles, writings, and photographs of the fallen soldiers are displayed, the novel critically brings into relief the mechanism of the state's power to control, bind, and blind its people. Miyo thinks "she would never let her father remain here, among ghosts" (245). She does not wish to be one of the "wizened" women "weep[ing] before a tiny untouchable square of photograph, an obscure grey gnarl of a human face under glass, one among thousands—millions?" (244). Even Setsuko, who originally was set on burying her husband Masao's ashes at Yasukuni (for he too had fought and dedicated his life to Japan, only not to death) comes to realize that "there was nothing particularly glorious" about this "dreary" place (249).

As the title *One Hundred Million Hearts* suggests, while sympathizing with the people's mentality driven by the war slogan of the time, this novel points out the futility of the Great Cause, the painful reality that people were sacrificing their lives "for nothing, for no good reason" (254). Miyo and Setsuko see the widows' complete, on-going belief in and devotion to the country as "grotesque" (244) and "vain" (218). Miyo's step-sister Hana attempts but fails to make these widows "see." This critically brings to attention that by worshipping rather than just remembering, the widows/worshippers are recapturing the war in a glorified light, including the atrocities committed in the war. Setsuko reflects on how the "picture" and "feeling" of "beauty and grace" that she had of Yasukuni are creations of her own mind, made from images of plump cooing doves and cherry blossoms in full bloom at Yasukuni. She realizes that such "picture" and "feeling" "could make you forget everything, if you were ever hungry or cold, humiliated or lonely, or if you didn't

know where home was” (249). The novel emphasizes that the “less pleasant aspects” of Japanese involvement in the war should not be blurred and forgotten by such a “picture” in one’s mind of “a cloud of floating petals” (249).

VI. Conclusion

In Joy Kogawa’s recently published essay, *Gently to Nagasaki*, the author introduces a shocking experience she had while watching the play *A Nanking Winter* by Marjorie Chan (about the Nanking massacre) and while reading the *Rape of Nanking* by Iris Chang. Kogawa says that only after writing about Nagasaki in *Obasan* did she realize other aspects of Japanese involvement in WWII. In *Gently to Nagasaki*, Kogawa talks about the Japanese massacre and rape of Nanking, and criticizes Japan for its “historical amnesia” and its reluctance to acknowledge its negative history. She urges the people of Japan not to “hold down the lid of the past” (*Gently* 191), but instead to “acknowledge the facts of their country’s past” (*Gently* 193).

The trajectory of Kogawa’s writings from *Obasan* to *Gently to Nagasaki*, together with other works we have looked at above, illustrate a shift in the way Japan’s involvement in the Asia-Pacific War is depicted in Post-Redress Canadian fiction. Before Redress, there was an emphasis on depicting Japanese Canadian and Japan as victims of war. After the official apology in 1988, however, one can see various attempts to depict the “less pleasant” aspects of Japanese involvement in the Asia-Pacific War.

Post-Redress works depict Japanese involvement from a more comprehensive, global perspective. The geographical setting of the story extends from Asia to North America, Europe, and the Oceania region. These novels depict Japan’s negative history from the perspective of global characters who have lived in many different places. Naoe in *Chorus of Mushroom*, for instance, moves from Japan to Manchuria to Canada. Matthew Lim in *Certainty* moves from North Borneo to Australia, and then finally immigrates to Canada. These novels involve reminiscences from the perspective of a later time regarding events before and during the Japanese occupation, emphasizing the effects it still has on the ongoing present. These characters capture events, not just from one perspective, but from diversified or in-between standpoints. It is precisely this “in-between” perspective that enables a prying-open of the history that Japan attempts to forget or deny. Recapturing Japan and the war from a broader, global perspective reflects what Sakamoto says: “We are no longer just Canadian citizens. Due to globalization, we are much more citizens of the world. We have to take on that unpleasant history of Japan and talk about it” (Cuder-Dominguez 139–40).

Notes

- 1 During Redress, Japanese Canadian fiction focused on depicting Japanese Canadian internment during WWII. Japan’s involvement in the Asia-Pacific War was not the central issue of concern at that time. It is, however, noteworthy that there were Japanese Canadians who were in Japan when the war broke out and could not return. For instance, it was common for Japanese Canadian families to send their children

to Japan for their education. It was also common for Japanese Canadians to temporarily return to Japan in order to look after sick parents or relatives. Another significant fact to remember is that 3,964 Japanese Canadians were deported to Japan in 1946 (Greenaway). Although there was a certain number of Japanese Canadians in Japan before, during, and after the war, people paid little attention to the experiences of these Japanese Canadians in Japan. One of the reasons for this is, as Tatsuo Kage explains, because the Redress movement “emphasized the Canadian nature of the issue”:

Most of us heard about “repatriation” or “deportation” but it was rarely talked about during our redress campaign in the 1980s. Perhaps this was because our campaign emphasized the Canadian nature of the issue, in other words, we raised the issue of unjust treatment of its own citizens by the government and we demanded amendments of the wrongs done to Japanese Canadians in Canada. Therefore, activists in the Redress campaign in Canada had little interest in people in Japan even though their experiences could have been even more serious or aggravated. (Greenaway)

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