



The Freudian Otherness/Unhomeliness in Asian- Canadian Narratives

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the (im)possibilities of belonging within the melancholic Asian-Canadian narratives written by Joy Kogawa, Gurjinder Basran and Hiromi Goto. As is argued by Homi Bhabha, “[T]he ‘unhomely’ does provide a ‘non-continuist’ problematic that dramatizes—in the figure of woman—the ambivalent structure of the civil State as it draws its rather paradoxical boundary between the private and the public spheres. [...], for Freud, the unheimlich is ‘the name for everything that ought to have remained [...] secret and hidden but has come to light’” [1:10]. Between the “unheimlich” of Freud and the “unhomely” of Bhabha lies the ambivalent in-betweenness of Asian-Canadian minorities whose sense of relocation of the home justifies their “unhomeliness” as diasporic identities. In her special way, Goto explains this point through the female character of Naoe, in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, as follows: “You cannot move to a foreign land and call that place home because you parrot the words around you. Find your home inside yourself first, I say. Let your home words grow out from the inside, not the outside in” [2:48].

Keywords: unhomely; Freudian otherness; Asian-Canadian diasporas.

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1. Introduction

The Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood describes Canadian literature as “a generally pessimistic or ‘ironic’ literature, [...] The tone of Canadian literature as a whole is, of course, the dark background: a reader must face the fact that Canadian literature is undeniably somber and negative” [3:35-245].

She is not the only one to talk about “dark” and negative literature since Vijay Mishra’s definition of diasporic narratives is more ironic, as one can see in the following quotation:

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements [4:1].

As a matter of fact, one can observe that Asian-Canadian writers as well as their characters are engaged in an active search for an inward/beyond home space within which to dwell. Indeed, “Freud’s essay ‘The Uncanny’ (1919) figures the ‘unhomely’ experience of home as the haunted house” [5:30], or in Deborah Madsen’s terms, “the place inhabited by death: ‘The unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. [...] In this case, too, then, the unheimlich is what was once Heimlich, familiar” [5:30]. Murasaki in *Chorus of Mushrooms* argues that, “[h]ome life is something you have to cart around with you forever. No Freudian shit for [her] but the home life stuff gets tattooed on to you something awful” [2:36]. In Kogawa’s novel, Naomi is teaching in Alberta but she stated once that she was born on “June 18, 1936, Vancouver, British Columbia” [6:9], and her remembering of her family’s home in Vancouver shows how homesick and “unheimlich” she is, even if she is still in her homeland, Canada. Through the examples of Naomi and Murasaki, one can note an uncanny denotation of the (un)homely, and this is what we seek to explore.

The importance of “home”, in our corpus, could be further clarified by adopting Diana Brydon’s point of view that “such a notion has to be problematized in view of a contemporary understanding of ‘home as a mobile and unsettled concept’ (Brydon, ‘Canadian Writers’ 14)” [7:172]. We find, for example, through the following sentence narrated by Naomi an unsettled concept of home, when she observes that, “It usually takes [her] at least two weeks to feel at home with a new class” [6:6]. As theorized by Goulart Almeida: “Home can be seen more as a ‘homing desire,’ than a desire for return to a specific spatial configuration, and such a ‘homing desire’ highlights the experience of this second generation of characters who inhabit the city space, but do not seem to feel a sense of belonging or connectedness with the city surroundings” [7:172]. Goulart Almeida’s claim can be further explained by referring to Meena in *Everything Was Good-Bye*. Among her fragmented memories, she remembers when she started working as a teacher. She envied the way her colleagues at work used to enjoy privacy and go out the weekends. She says: “If only my co-workers recognized that we had only the illusion of privacy. [...] When I’d first started working [...], I’d gone out with them once or twice ... After that I made

excuses [...]. I found that avoiding social situations was easiest and tied myself up in extra projects that made me look too busy to talk” [8:88-89]. She does not feel a sense of belonging with her surroundings. She feels a total alienation and a real sense of otherness because of her subordination to Indian norms that we will evoke later on. Meena’s situation reveals a sense of an ethnic woman’s internal exile that is characterized by a loss between two belongings. Goulart Almeida’s statement above can also be applied to the silent and ambiguous female character, Obasan. In the following quotation, Naomi wonders if Obasan will agree to leave her home after the death of her husband:

I cannot imagine her more comfortable in any other house.

“This house,” Obasan says as if she has read my mind. “This body. Everything old.”

The house is indeed old, as she is also old. Every homemade piece of furniture, each pot holder and paper doily is a link in her lifeline. [...] They rest in the corners like parts of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory. This house is now her blood and bones. [6:18]

Naomi sees that Obasan can feel comfortable only in her own house. Obasan considers her house as a body, while Naomi regards it, metaphorically, as her blood and bones. One can say that Obasan’s house is her Japanese identity that rests in the “corners”, or, let us call it the borderlines of marginality.

2. Mother-less: Stateless Orphans

This subpart will underline the represented image of the mother as a metaphor referring to the feelings of belonging, homeland and nation or the contrary. In these Asian-Canadian Bildungsromans, the mother, whether Japanese or Indian is, in the critic Lim’s terms, “the figure not only of maternity but also of racial consciousness, while the struggles of the daughters to be separate from their racial origin or to recover it, given the hard historical contexts, are therefore matters of political as well as psychological urgency” [9:293]. Gayatri Spivak explains the logic of relating the role of women with nationalism in the following way:

The role of women, through their placing in the reproductive heteronormativity that supports nationalisms, is of great significance in this general temporizing narrative. When we are born, we are born into the possibility of timing, temporalization—we are in time. [...] Since it is usually our mothers who seem to bring us into temporalization, by giving birth, our temporizing often marks that particular intuition of origin by coding and recoding the mother, by computing possible futures through investing or manipulating womanspace. The daughtership of the nation is bound up with that very recoding. Another example of temporizing towards a future that will fall due is of women as holding the future of the nation in their wombs. It comes from the obvious narrative of marriage [10:42-43].

We will try to examine what is called by Spivak “the daughtership of the nation”, considering the witnessed mother-less existence in Asian-Canadian literature, where the mother is a symbolic image of the entire community. According to the critic, Christina Tourino:

Contemporary ethnic women's fiction is marked not so much by a saturation of maternity, then, but by its disruption or absence. In the case of *Obasan*, this disruption could not be more concrete. The expressly premeditated purpose of the Canadian government's war policy against Japanese Canadians was "to prevent further propagation of the species" (116). Canada's government accomplished this through its early removal of Japanese Canadian men to work camps, followed by the double dispersal and exile of Japanese Canadian families. Canada's postwar policy of continued exile, and, in some cases, deportation to Japan, completed the total disruption of Japanese cultural and physical reproduction it had begun during the war [11:135].

Tourino's argument relates the absence of the mother in *Obasan* to the Canadian government's policy of limiting the reproduction of the Japanese race. We read the absence of the mother in our corpus as a deliberate attempt to highlight the immigrant sense of being stateless orphans.

The critic Geok-lin Lim thinks that Naomi "presents the Japanese mother's absence as the problematic and the recovery of her lost identity as the means to the daughter's recovery of psychic health" [9:294]. Lim's point of view can be illustrated by stating Naomi's persistent request to learn about her mother from *Obasan*, in the following way: " 'Please tell me about Mother,' I would say as a child to *Obasan*. I was consumed by the question. Devoured alive. But *Obasan* gave me no answers" [6:31]. Thus, Naomi is looking for an answer to her lost identity as a Japanese-Canadian since childhood. The proof of her lost identity is that the reader observes the absence of Naomi's mother which alludes to the loss in terms of belonging. Geok-lin Lim adds that, "the daughter's quest for the lost mother echoes the 'mourning for the mother-daughter relationship' which Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner find in much contemporary women's fiction. Like other American women's texts, *Obasan* especially should be read as 'restoring the image of our mothers' and 'embracing [...] the maternal past'" [9:294].

Moving back and forth in her agitated memory and using strange imagery, Naomi narrates her memory of their house in Vancouver and links it to "Japanese motherhood" as follows:

Inside the house in Vancouver there is confidence and laughter, music and mealtimes, games and storytelling. But outside, even in the backyard, there is an infinitely unpredictable, unknown, and often dangerous world. Speech hides within me, watchful and afraid. [...] Mother removes the live chicks first, placing them in her apron. All the while that she acts, there is calm efficiency in her face and she does not speak. Her eyes are steady and matter-of-fact—the eyes of Japanese motherhood. They do not invade and betray. They are eyes that protect, shielding what is hidden most deeply in the heart of the child. She makes safe the small stirrings underfoot and in the shadows [6:69-71].

Naomi asserts that she was free at her family's home but outside there was a dangerous world urging her to stay voiceless. Since she remembers such memories of a difficult and peculiar childhood, it can be a sign that she has internalized the sense of fear, "betrayal", lack of security and silence. She internalizes the feeling of the unhomely and her memory of her mother, which alludes to Japanese motherhood/nationalism, can be an attempt to find a safe territory to dwell within even if it is her dark past. The following quotation shows how Naomi

mourns the absence of her mother:

One night I waken frightened. There is no light anywhere—in the hallway, in the streets, in the neighbors' houses. This night I remember we are not to turn on any lights. We are doing what Stephen calls “blackout”. I feel my way along the walls into the living room, where there are voices. Old Man Gower is here. He has never come into our house before and it is strange that he should be sitting in the darkness with Father. [...] Even in the darkness, I can tell that Father's eyes are not at ease. [...] Old Man Gower [...] seems more powerful than Father, larger and more at home even though this is our house. He sounds as if he is trying to comfort my father, but there is a falseness in the tone. The voice is too sure—too strong. Father is as if he is not here. If my mother were back, she would move aside all the darkness with her hands and we would be safe and at home in our home [6:81-83].

The reader of Kogawa's *Obasan* can touch the darkness felt by the characters through the anaphora used by the term “darkness”. Naomi remembers this dark night when the white Canadian, Old Man Gower enters their house. Despite the darkness and her young age, she was able to observe that he was more powerful than her father. She felt that her father was not at ease and voiceless at his own house contrary to his white Canadian “foreigner” whose voice was too strong. Naomi's comparison between the white Canadian man and her Japanese-Canadian father proves the dominance of mainstream Canadians over ethnic minorities as is the case of the Japanese-Canadian community here. Naomi's impossible wish that if her mother were present, she would put an end not only to the darkness of their life, but also to the superiority of Old Man Gower, has a feminist dimension. The passive father in front of his white Canadian visitor/“stranger”, and his inability to get rid of this monster of darkness also enhanced the feminist/powerful ability of the mother to challenge this dark atmosphere, to lighten their days as well as nights and to provide safety. Thus, the absence of Naomi's mother explains the notion of being “unhomely” for such ethnic minorities.

Pin-chia Feng distinguishes Kogawa's *Obasan* as an excellent example of the narrative return of the mother, or the renewed search for the missing mother, which inevitably brings back the repressed memory of racial oppression, by explaining that:

Barricaded from the past, Naomi finds herself living in a “perpetual tense” (7), meaning both a tense personality and perpetuation of childhood. In a bittersweet elegy to her mother who died in the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki, Naomi juxtaposes the loss of Mother with the loss of language: “Silent Mother, you do not speak or write. You do not reach through the night to enter morning, but remain in the voiceless. From the extremity of much dying, the only sound that reaches me now is the sign of your remembered breath, a wordless word. How shall I attend that speech, Mother, how shall I trace that wave?” (241) [12:21-22].

Feng points out how the abrupt severance of “pre-Oedipal mother-daughter symbiosis, as discussed in Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Motherhood*, results in a lack of voice and of necessary nourishment to ‘grow up’. [...] With this nourishment of love, Kogawa textually reestablishes the missing link between the mother and the daughter” [12:21-22]. In the following quotation one can see how Kogawa reestablishes a link between

mother and daughter, through the photograph that Obasan gave to Naomi. The latter describes it as follows:

I am about two or three years of age and clinging to my mother's leg with one arm [...] "yasashi desho," Obasan says.
She has often spoken of my mother's "yasashi kokoro," her tender, kind, and thoughtful heart. She places the picture in my hand. "Here is the best letter. This is the best time. These are the best memories." [6:56]

Obasan encourages Naomi to remember the best memories that are related to her mother who symbolizes the Japanese home and sense of belonging. However, Naomi's photograph led her to sketch her memories in the following way, "Only fragments relate me to them now, to this young woman, my mother, and me, her infant daughter. Fragments of fragments. Parts of a house. Segments of stories" [6:64]. She is a victim of a fragmented life shaped by the absence of her mother. She has only this photograph as well as some memories of her dead mother. Poor Naomi carries within herself a mixture of fragments of truth, fragments of originality, fragments of memories, fragments of traditions, fragments of a 'foreign' present and even fragments of individual self. This photograph draws the latter "into a whirlpool" of memories, and revitalizes the reader's memory of Salman Rushdie's photograph that inspired him to admit that "the past is a foreign country, [...] the past is home [...] a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" [13:9].^a

According to Feng "the mother's physical absence is no longer mourned; her spiritual presence is celebrated. The return of the mother which facilitates the 'growth' of the daughter in *Obasan* exemplifies the pattern of 'working through' repression to selfhood in many ethnic women's Bildungsromane" [12:21-22]. Similarly to Feng, Geok-lin Lim classifies *Obasan* as "a mystery story, a historical and psychological riddle seeking to unravel the mystery of the mother's disappearance at the beginning of the Pacific War [...]. The lost mother is also the figure for displacement of a whole community" [9:301-302]. Geok-lin Lim sees that Naomi must also unravel the mystery of the disappearance of a whole community of "Japanese Canadians who uncomplainingly accepted the Government's Orders-in-Council to exile them from their West coast homes to the Canadian interior, the story of 'the Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei, the Japanese Canadians. We disappear into the future undemanding as dew' (p. 112)" [9:301-302]. In fact, one must note that Naomi's mother is a victim of the atomic bomb. As is stated by the critic Teruyo Ueki, the suffering of Naomi's mother "is easily superimposed upon the agony of the Japanese-Canadians as the victims of wartime disenfranchisement in Canada. As Mother endured her torment in silence, the Japanese-Canadians suffered their tragic fate in silence" [14:12-13].^b This

^a The following quotation reveals the whole description of Rushdie's photograph: "An old photograph in a cheap frame hangs on a wall of the room where I work. It's a picture dating from 1946 of a house into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born. The house is rather peculiar—a three-storeyed gabled affair with tiled roofs and round towers in two corners, each wearing a pointy tiled hat. 'The past is a foreign country,' goes the famous opening sentence of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, 'they do things differently there'" [13-9].

^b The following quotation explains Ueki's logic of relating the suffering of Naomi's mother to the trauma of the Japanese community: "the suffering of Naomi's mother, who has perished under the atomic bomb, is enshrined in the folder which resembles Kannon's shrine. All the analogies Kogawa uses here converge in the motif of suffering, and Mother is again a pivotal figure that reflects the ordeal of the Japanese-Canadian community, evoking simultaneously the image of the suffering Christ who was despised and rejected by his people. Thus, it can be said that Mother appears in the novel as a symbolic presence carrying out dual as well as paradoxical

silence becomes part of the identity of most Japanese-Canadians such as that of Obasan and of Naomi's Uncle. Naomi mentions that, "Aya Obasan is in the house every day now. She is gentle and quiet like Mother [...]. But even with Obasan's warmth and constant presence, there is an ominous sense of cold and absence—a darkness that has crept into the house" [6:81]. It might be true that Naomi praises Obasan Aya and her efforts to fill the place of her absent Mother, but she confesses that there always is a sense of darkness. She wants to stress the fact that the protection of the mother is unique and can never be replaced by any other person. It could be useful to conclude with an insightful parallelism seen in these sentences, where the mother could be a reference to the homeland, Japan, and Obasan's substitution of the mother is comparable to Canada's attitude to these people and its efforts to replace their homeland.

Actually, the darkness is omnipresent in Naomi's life, for example, she stays "awake thinking of dangerous people wielding hooks and prongs, but during the day there is another danger, another darkness [...], the two shadows of day and night come together in a white heavy mist of fear" [6:87]. The ghost of darkness alternates between the night and the day but ironically this darkness comes under the cover of a "White heavy mist of fear." She views everything as dark or darkened and this is hard as long as she is talking from the point of view of a young child needing the protection of her mother.

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, the mother is present in the life of her daughter but there is a cultural and identitarian space between the mother and her daughter. We are talking about the distance between Naoe as an anti-assimilation character and her assimilationist daughter Keiko, as is expressed by Naoe in the following way: "I mutter and mutter and no one to listen. I speak my words in Japanese and my daughter will not hear them. The words that come from our ears, our mouths, they collide in the space between us" [2:4]. We have mentioned at the beginning of this subpart that the represented image of the mother is a metaphor referring to the feelings of belonging to homeland and nation. Here the assimilationist Keiko appears to be a real stateless orphan in spite of the presence of her mother, Naoe. The space between this mother and her daughter reflects metaphorically the space between Keiko and her Japanese belonging. Concerning the attempt of her daughter to ignore her, Naoe, who is the emblem of the Japanese identity here, notes ironically the following: "It's funny how children grow inside your body, but they turn out to be strangers" [2:69]. She criticizes Keiko for growing up in Japan but, after migrating to Canada, doing her best to treat every Japanese aspect of life as strange. The stereotype of Keiko represents the case of immigrant mothers who select integration/invisibility in order to avoid being sent back to her homeland, Japan. This seems to have a melancholic dimension.

3. Diasporic "Melancholia"

A critical reading of Asian-Canadian literature cannot dismiss the task of talking about the dead characters and their active roles in motivating the memories of the protagonists. These narratives take on what is called by Daniel Coleman a "psychosocial terrain" that "contemporary criticism would commonly approach via the theory

roles a silent sufferer evoking the image of the Christian God and a tender comforter associated with the Buddhist Goddess" [14:12-13].

of melancholia” [15:57].^c This highly influential theory “takes its cue from Freud’s 1917 essay, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ in which Freud differentiates melancholia from healthy mourning” [15:57]. The Oriental “Other” of Edward Said, that explains the exotic otherness of diasporic minorities, is different from the “Other” represented by Freud^d that can be used as a reference in reading the psychological situations of Asian-Canadian characters once they talk about dead people, or their Freudian “Other”. We will explore how the ego of these minorities, to borrow Butler’s terms, “internalizes their ‘melancholia’ that builds their ‘character’.”^e

Whereas Freud theorized in his essay that “mourning relinquishes loss and replaces it with other precious objects”^f, Asian-Canadian writers like Kogawa, Basran and Goto, create a kind of melancholia that refuses to abandon the characters’ loss. Consequently, in Coleman’s terms, their melancholia’s “refusal to let go of loss becomes constitutive of the ego itself, which constructs an identity out of the continuous and disavowed consumption of that loss” [15:57]. For further clarification, we can cite Coleman’s explanation of the notion of melancholia in the following way:

Many cultural theorists have seen in Freud’s conception of melancholia a helpful explanation for why the wounds of history, whether individual or social, retain such a stubborn, determining power over the *longue durée*. For example, David Eng and David Kazanjian, strongly influenced by the work of Judith Butler, adapted Freud’s conception from its original formulation in clinical psychology to the sphere of cultural politics by suggesting that rather than seeing melancholia as a neurosis to be relieved by treatment, there may be a productive politics of melancholia whereby the refusal of those who have suffered oppression to forgive and forget the past could constitute a kind of “revolt” against sanctioned oblivion, against dominant culture’s desire to sweep the suffering of oppressed people under the carpet of official history (16). For these theorists, the melancholic re-citation of traumatic loss guards against social amnesia. [...] the melancholic recitation of cultural loss may animate history’s “remains” (to use Eng and Kazanjian’s terminology) and therefore serve to remind dominant cultural elites of the histories they would rather forget, the treadmill characterized by the melancholic cycle runs the risk, as Cho suggests, of dooming the oppressed to perpetually reiterate their

^c According to Coleman, “[m]elancholia theory has been powerfully influential in a number of fields of cultural critique and analysis, [...], and in critical race and postcolonial studies, as in the work of Ann Anling Cheng (*The Melancholy of Race*) and Paul Gilroy (*Postcolonial Melancholia*)” [15:57].

^d In the following quotation, Butler explains Freud’s theory of “melancholia” and the “other”: “Freud isolates the mechanism of melancholia as essential to ‘ego formation’ and ‘character,’ but only alludes to the centrality of melancholia to gender. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), he elaborates on the structure of mourning as the incipient structure of ego formation, a thesis whose traces can be found in the 1917 essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia.’ In the experience of losing another human being whom one has loved, Freud argues, the ego is said to incorporate that other into the very structure of the ego, taking on attributes of the other and ‘sustaining’ the other through magical acts of imitation. The loss of the other whom one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor that other within the very structure of the self: ‘So by taking flight into the ego, love escapes annihilation’ (178). This identification is not simply momentary or occasional, but becomes a new structure of identity; in effect, the other becomes part of the ego through the permanent internalization of the other’s attributes. In cases in which an ambivalent relationship is severed through loss, that ambivalence becomes internalized as a self-critical or self-debasing disposition in which the role of the other is now occupied and directed by the ego itself” [16:57-58].

^e Butler argues that, “*In The Ego and the Id*, Freud refers to this process of internalization described in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ and remarks: ‘We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that [in those suffering from it] an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego—that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is. Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its ‘character’ ’(18)” [16:58].

^f Freud quoted in Coleman, “Epistemological Crosstalk,” *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries*, 57.

trauma as a permanent identity. Ironically, then, this theory which provides a powerful criticism of the status quo, can too easily become a powerful re-citation of the status quo. At its best, the theory of melancholia exposes and explains the pathologies of the existing system of power relations, but at its worst, it does this at the expense of those who suffer. (italics in original) [15:57-59]

As is viewed by Coleman and some cultural theorists, Kogawa, Goto and Basran succeed in expressing their individual and social melancholia as a kind of revolt. They imprison their characters within an internal melancholic exile and prevent them from healing from their continuous suffering. They do so because they are aware that, in Coleman's terms, "successful mourning will mean assimilation to the dominant norms" [15:59]. As literary artists, they turn their melancholic trauma into a productive literary imaging and imagining. Let us, now discover how they manipulate the theme of death to express individual melancholia that can reflect the melancholia of an entire diasporic group.

In *Obasan*, the appearance of the event of death must be the climax of the plot and a turning point in the life of Naomi who already emphasized the strength of such a word in her life at the beginning of the second chapter. She expresses the serious depth of this event within a poetic form to attract the attention of the reader:

SEPTEMBER 13, 1972.

In the future I will remember the details of this day, the ordinary trivia illuminated by an event that sends my mind scurrying for significance. I seem unwilling to live with randomness. [6:6]

The details of this day have been shown through the remarks of the students about Naomi's name and marriage, then comes the "death" with all its power to illuminate the ordinary trivia of this woman, because due to this death, she will discover various facts about the wounded history of the Japanese-Canadian community. She will receive the painful news about her Uncle's death and her reaction is as follows:

It's Dr. Brace from the hospital in Granton. His voice in my ear has the quality of an old recording. I can't believe what he is saying.

"Who? My uncle?"

There is an odd sensation like an electrical jolt [...]. "Be still," the voice inside is saying. "Sift the words thinly." I am aware that I cannot speak.

I don't know if I have said goodbye to Dr. Brace. [...] My mind is working strangely, as if it has separated and hovers above me, ordering me to action from a safe distance. [6:11]

The reaction of Naomi once she learns of the death of her Uncle demonstrates her love of this person. The Uncle is the only man who has been represented positively. The previous analysis demonstrates that the Uncle was the first male character to be depicted at the beginning of the novel about whom Naomi has good memories. The death of this man impacts badly this woman who remains speechless. The Uncle's death signifies the end of the male goodness in Naomi's life and from now on there will be only racist males like Sigmund and the widower father. This death is a turning point in this teacher's life and a climax in the novel's plot.

Death signifies, often, the end of everything that has any relation with life, yet in this novel it is considered as the beginning of different facts that were buried in the past. The transition from the second chapter of the novel to the third one comes through the introduction of melancholic news, which is an indication of the difference of this chapter from the previous ones. The tone of the first chapter was a somewhat earnest and romantic, while the second one oscillates between humor and irony inside the classroom. Unlike the preceding chapters, the third chapter starts without setting out either the date or the time and Uncle's death urges Naomi to go to Granton, where her Uncle was living with his wife, Obasan.

The death of the Uncle throws Naomi into an internal exile of endless memories and questions. After her arrival to the "old" house of Obasan, Naomi states the following:

I open my mouth to ask, "Did he suffer very much?" but loud talking feels obscene. "Everyone someday dies," she says eventually. Her voice is barely audible. [...] We sit in silence sipping and turning the cups around on the tips of our fingers. Behind her on the counter is a black loaf of Uncle's stone bread, hefty as a rock. [...] With Uncle gone now there will be no more black bread and black bread jokes. [...] What, I wonder, was Uncle thinking those last few hours? Had the world turned upside down? Perhaps everything was reversing rapidly and he was tunneling backward top to bottom, his feet in an upstairs attic of humus and memory [6:14-16].

Naomi's question about her Uncle's suffering before his death can be a reference to his suffering during his life as a Japanese-Canadian whose stone bread is black like the darkness characterizing the life of this Japanese minority. Naomi imagines that her Uncle's last moments might have taken him to revisit his attic of memory. She knows that part of the Japanese-Canadian identity is their memory and past.

Naomi says that, "we're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves" [6:31]. If Naomi thinks that their dead relatives refuse to bury themselves, her reader notes that she and Obasan refuse to bury the ghosts of their past. Helena Grice reads the repeatedly enacted shift into the past in Naomi's consciousness as exemplifying "the dominance of the past on both Naomi's and Obasan's present. Of all the characters in the text, it is these two who are least able to sever themselves from their past, and its psychological effects upon their present" [17:95]. In fact, Naomi tries to externalize through words her psychological melancholy, but Obasan internalizes her feelings and thoughts, her past and present, to end up silent. Naomi considers silence as "the language of [Obasan's] grief" [6:17].

The melancholic memories of Naomi that she narrates about her mother, father and grandparents are all about dead people at the time of narration. One can interpret her act of narrating such sad stories as an attempt to challenge her past by confronting its sorrowful details. It can also be a kind of revolt against the dominant culture as was stated by Daniel Coleman at the beginning of this subpart. This does not deny the fact that Naomi is trapped by her "gothic" stories, to use Brian Norman's terms, "inspired by Freudian-era psychology and its vision of an internally haunted self" [18:5-6]⁸ Kogawa's gothic stories are totally different from Goto's gothic

⁸ In the following quotation Norman explains what is "gothic literature"; he is talking about American literature, but we think that his argument can be applied on Asian-Canadian literature equally as it evokes "shared

literature that we will explore in the next analysis, especially as one of the narrative voices states that there is “no room for change except through death. And death” [2:45]. We are talking about what Markus Müller portrays as “the non-conforming” Naoe, who “narrates herself into a [...] mythologizing space of emancipation and resistance against the ‘re-territorialization of the aging body’: She leaves behind the house that symbolizes her being culturally constructed as old, ethnic, invisible” [19:132].

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, one can witness a conversation between Murasaki and her dead grandmother, Naoe, within which the latter denies her death. This denial of death can be merely the voice of Murasaki’s melancholic psychology after the death of Naoe, but can also be a denial of the death or the end of Naoe’s voice. We are referring to the following conversation:

Murasaki: Obachan! Obachan! OBACHAN!
Naoe: Ara! Murasaki-chan? [...]
Murasaki: [...] you’re dead after all, aren’t you?
Naoe: Of course not! As if I would be ready for death [...]. If an old woman chooses to leave, it’s an easy enough thing to cover one’s tracks. Dead! Mattaku!
Murasaki: Sorry. But you have to admit, you kinda shocked everyone. Especially Mom. She’s kinda lost it.
Naoe: Ara. Is she all right?
Murasaki: No. Not really. I think she’s had a bit of a nervous breakdown.
Naoe: Ara-raaa. I’m so sorry. It must be hard for you. But harder yet on Keiko [...], she must be awfully hurt to hide inside herself. You must help her, Murasaki. [2:131]

Despite the existential distance between these two ethnic women, there is a spiritual continuity. Because of the lack of communication between Murasaki and her mother Keiko, the death of Naoe affects badly her granddaughter to the extent that the latter imagines this conversation with her dead grandmother. What Murasaki states about the aftermath of Naoe’s death, could be the outcome of the generational gap and the cultural conflict that existed between them previously:

When Obachan left our home forever, Mom had a nervous breakdown. Well, nothing diagnosed or formally said, she just refused to leave her room. She stayed in bed for three months and never opened the curtains. Never turned on the lights. I stayed home from school to take care of her [...] in the dark with a silent mother. Mother in name but a total stranger. A place I had never tried to move beyond. I wasn’t free from guilt. [...] I was crushed. I had had visions of me going back to school and parties [...], but the future

histories” that are “recalled and reshaped in the present” through the memories of the characters studied: “Ghosts are plentiful in American and British literature, especially in women’s writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the ghost story enjoyed a resurgence, led especially by such writers as Edith Wharton, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Gothic literature scholar Kathy Justice Gentile sees such ghost stories as ‘supernatural commentaries on gendered fin de siècle anxieties.’ Ghost stories have long helped a nation work through all manner of anxieties about identity ties, be they welcome or repressed, acknowledged or buried. Literary critic Kathleen Brogan explains that the ghost story was subsequently reinvented by the modernists, who were inspired by Freudian-era psychology and its vision of an internally haunted self. Then, she argues, ghost stories became prominent in twentieth-century American ethnic literatures because they enact how shared histories are recalled and reshaped in the present. In such stories of ‘cultural haunting,’ ghosts are a trope for ‘acculturation and cultural transmission in a polyethnic society’ so that ‘the bloodline family ghosts of different ethnic groups belong in fact to the same cross-cultural genre’” [18:5-6].

looked dim and I became depressed. Not the ideal emotional state for someone who is trying to nurse someone else out of a depression. The home became a hollow thing, the only noise was the sound of dust snaking across the wooden floors. After all those years of Obachan's voice. Her language of memory, pain, desire. The silence in our home was so complete our ears rang with the sudden loss of sound. I turned my thoughts inward, and inward yet again [2:127-129].

It could be a possible summary of the sorrowful lives of this ethno-racial minority. Murasaki surprises the reader when she talks about her mother's depression after the grandmother's death. Keiko has been depicted as the daughter who opposed her aged mother, Naoe, in everything and her depression was not an expected reaction. Moreover, Murasaki's sympathy for her mother's pitiful situation could be counted as another surprise for the reader. The status of these two women, who used to tease their mothers, is just the same. The depressed Keiko might be regretting her bad treatment of her aged mother in forgetting that death would knock on her door. Keiko's reaction towards the loss of her mother can be read as a metaphorical reference to her inner sadness because of her loss of Japanese identity. However, the lost Murasaki is not quite aware of the importance of her mother in her life. Even though she stays at home to take care of her, she does not really feel her mother's motherhood for she considers her "a total stranger". Murasaki's confused feelings also reflect her confusion as a Canadian of Japanese origin. Certainly, the death of Naoe has thrown Murasaki into depression, thus, she is a depressed girl nursing a depressed mother. Murasaki, however, discards her mother's deep dejection. She rather concentrates on the act of mourning the death of her grandmother.

Murasaki accuses death of having silenced their home. The anaphora used through the repetition of the word "silence", stresses the loss of sound within this family in parallel with the loss of Naoe's voice. They are, actually, the victims of a double loss of voice where their voice as a minority in front of the majority/mainstream is silenced, and their voice within themselves is shut up to sink down into a language of unhappy and painful memories. They end up as refugees of silence and internal exile as is expressed by Murasaki when she says that she turned her "thoughts inward, and inward yet again" [2:129].

Naoe's death affects her granddaughter greatly to the extent that the latter retells passionately her grandmother's stories. This reminds the reader of Gayatri Spivak's statement that, "every declaration of death, every elegy, says at the end that the person is reborn," [10:82] and this is exactly the case for Naoe. The latter once preached to Murasaki the following, "you can never discard the past. It stays with you always. Let people remember me. There are worse things to remember than an old woman who can still play a few tricks" [2:145-146]. Naoe's "tricks", as a female character and an "old" narrative voice, remind us of Brian Norman's critical reading of the role of the "dead" in American literature, which can be applicable to Naoe as well.

Brian Norman believes that, in American literature, "the dead talk more often than we might expect—especially women" [18:1]. He explains that these dead women constitute a tradition in which "writers address pressing social issues that refuse to stay dead. When they talk, they speak not only to their own lives but also to matters of justice, history, and dearly held national ideals—whether the community welcomes it or not. Thus, writers stage encounters with that which should be past but has not passed" [18:1]. Norman's argument can be applied

to Asian-Canadian literature to interpret the case of Naoe, for example. Through Naoe's stereotype one can note that, in Norman's terms, dead women tend to talk when "their experiences of death can address an issue of injustice that their communities might prematurely consign to the past. When declarations of injustice's end do not coincide with the achievement of actual justice, the resulting gaps create spaces from which these women speak" [18:1-2].^h Throughout the different parts of the novel, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, one can read the activist role of Naoe in addressing social and racial injustice as a word warrior. Therefore, we can suppose that the bodies of dead characters who talk, like Naoe, again to use Norman's words, "must be recognized as [bodies] of the community's own, a fictional corollary to the legal exercise of identifying a body at the morgue. Further, their bodies are often uncanny and bear marks of past struggles and social anxieties" [18:3].

In *Everything Was Good-Bye*, Gurjinder Basran tells the melancholic memories of the Indian community living in Canada through the stereotype of Meena. As the narrative voice, Meena narrates her overwhelmed self by the endless mourning of her father's death. In the following paragraph, she depicts the melancholic routine every Sunday:

Even though my father had been dead for sixteen years there were still enough relatives to fill every Sunday with pity. It was always the same. We would get up, clean the house [...], mourn the past and go to sleep. We existed between past dreams and present realities, never able to do anything but wait. For what, I didn't know. [...] I put the photo back in the album and the album back on the top of shelf, preserving my father's death just as my mother had so carefully preserved the details of his life. Just as my father's mother—my dadi—had when she'd come to Canada to mourn her son five years after his death.

"How we remember," my dadi told me and my sisters, "this is how we exist."

"The past is the only thing that matters," she said. [...] "It is the only thing we know. [...] This is what we were told. This is who we were." [8:5-6]

The female character, dadi, teaches her granddaughters that the past is their identity simply because, "this is what [they] were told. This is who [they] were." They pass these ideas from one generation to another to preserve their real identity as a dislocated and forgotten minority in its past.

The guests come to Meena's family home to pursue their ritual of lamenting the death of the father. Among these guests there is an old woman who asks Meena whether she remembers her father, then the same woman resumes, as follows: " 'So unfair [...] such a tragedy [...] he was so young, such a good man [...]. They said it was an accident [...] there was an investigation [...]. They were sorry [...] some of them even said it was his fault, but I know he was careful.' She spoke of it in fragments" [8:13]. If a strange woman talks about the accident in an affected manner emphasized by the fragmentation of her expressions, then let us see the attitude

^h According to Norman, in a meditation on death and subjectivity, "the theorist Colin Davis asks, 'Can the Dead Speak to Us?' He suggests that we are more likely to hear our own words imposed on the dead, though their traces may be found in moments of surprise, those which we can't anticipate. Inside literary worlds, though, dead women need not wait for a discerning listener attentive to the indirect and unexpected, nor must they accept the passivity their deceased status entails. They can speak for themselves. In doing so, they raise questions about gender and voice, sexual violence and nonnormative sexuality, class privilege and cross-class contact, reparations for past racial injustices, and the immigrant's fraught relationship with national identity, among other pressing concerns" [18:1-2].

of his youngest daughter, who does not know even his name.

Meena's mother has never told her daughters about the fatal accident of their father. This is what motivates Meena to concentrate on the guest, who came to mourn, to understand how they lost their father and this is part of her analysis of the whole situation:

My father had fallen from the twentieth floor of a luxury high-rise apartment building where he'd been framing the walls. He was proud of his work [...]. It seems strange to me that this building existed somewhere outside our mention of it. That somewhere people were living in these air-conditioned units, pushing their blond, blue-eyed babies in strollers along the very sidewalk where my father lay dead; he'd died instantly. Sometimes I dreamed I was him. Sometimes I dreamed I was the fall [...]. But no matter how many times I dreamed of his death, I could not conceive of it; he was a myth and my mother was a martyr. [...] Apparently, it was my mother's fate to be a widow with six daughters and our fate to become casualties of fractured lives. Though I struggled against such a predetermined existence, I knew that my sisters and I were all carved out of this same misery, existing only for others, like forgotten monuments that had been erected to commemorate events that had come and gone [8:14].

The guests come to commiserate about the father's death while they are burning and burying his wife alive. Meena feels sorry for the loss at an early age of her father who "was proud of his work". She condemns white people for their indifference regarding such accidents, because they are living in luxury while non-whites are suffering. The difficult jobs are given to non-white people like her father. The latter died and left behind him an immigrant wife struggling for the sake of her six daughters. Meena's deep love of her father can be noticed in her confession about dreaming of his death and she even imagines herself in his place. She cannot cope with his death which throws her into an internal exile of melancholic memories and sorrows. The rhetorical expressions of Meena drive her to epitomize the misery of her parents; her father is a myth while her mother is a martyr. Then, she focuses on the situation of the family members still alive, whose fates mute them into fractured existence. They are the victims of a rigid mentality that obliges them to commemorate past events and makes them like "forgotten monuments", the ghosts of their sad past.ⁱ Ironically, Meena, as a narrator, tells the reader that when the present guests leave, "others would take their place" [8:15], just to be sure that the "mother was repeatedly singed by their reminders, cremating her life inside herself" [8:15]. These people are mourning the husband's death while burning and burying his widow in a melancholic internal exile of Indian traditions. We can suggest, therefore, that the complex of melancholia portrayed in Asian-Canadian literature might have been behind the prevalent silence of the majority of these characters.

ⁱ In the same context, one can recall Mishra's explanation of the complex of melancholia that is represented by diasporic writers, and here Mishra's argument can be applied to the melancholic mourning of Meena's family: "Whenever the nation-state is perceived as racist or imperialist—Arnold Itwaru, for instance, reads Canada as a nation-state 'created and upheld in the ethos of imperialism' (1994: 7)—and the therapy of self-representation is denied to diasporic peoples, a state of melancholy sets in precisely because the past cannot be constructively interpreted [...]. I want to suggest that the diasporic imaginary is a condition (and 'imaginary' is the key concept here) of an impossible mourning that transforms mourning into melancholia. [...] Failure to objectify the loss means that the emptiness and impoverishment of the world (the condition of mourning) are transferred on to the ego: 'the complex of melancholia,' writes Freud, 'behaves like an open wound [that empties] the ego until it is totally impoverished' (262). But since the object of loss is never quantifiable (it is always deferred) the ego's relationship to the lost object is much more ambivalent" [4:9].

4. Conclusion

The three novels, *Obasan*, *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *Everything Was Good-Bye*, are notable for their specific personalization of the past that has been afforded a large space in these works. The Asian-Canadian novelists, Kogawa, Goto and Basran, represent to their readers the past as a powerful and influential agent in humanity's existence, in David Lowenthal's terms:

The past is everywhere. All around us lie features which, like ourselves and our thoughts, have more or less recognizable antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience. Each particular trace of the past ultimately perishes, but collectively they are immortal. Whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past is omnipresent.

Nowadays the past is also pervasive in its abundance of deliberate, tangible evocations. [20:xv]

The reader's attention is caught by the presentation of the "immortal", or, let us call it the endless past of these ethno-cultural writers; it traps them in an internal exile of traumatic and melancholic memories. This is expressed through the narrative voice in *Obasan* as follows:

A man's memories end up in some attic or in a Salvation Army bin. [...] and his face is lost in fading photographs, [...], the anecdotes gone. All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery. Our attics and living rooms encroach on each other, deep into their invisible places. [...] Like threads of old spiderwebs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles. [6:30-31]

Naomi's metaphoric depiction of her situation together with *Obasan* enhances what is stated by David Lowenthal in the quotation above. In both quotations, there is the adjective "pervasive" used as an identification of the great influence of the past and memories. According to the critics, Monica Manolescu and Charlotte Sturgess, ethnic writers are "often localised on an anxious border between an originary, 'imaginary homeland'—only recuperated through myth and storytelling—and the lived present" [21:6]. Manolescu and Sturgess argue that because these ethnic writers are "caught between here and there, departure and arrival, minority and exilic literatures readily generate themes and tropes of nostalgia and the in-between: an 'insider-outsider' status caught between community affiliations of origin and the social and cultural space of the adopted nation"[21:6]. This is how Asian-Canadian writers, like Kogawa, Basran and Goto, represent the Freudian otherness, unholiness and in-betweenness characterizing exilic literature.

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