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The Whirlpools of the Past: Understanding how the motif of "chaos" shapes memory and history in *Obasan* and *The Sorrow and the Terror*

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Abstract:

The motif of "chaos" has been a very distinct and essential part of diasporic literatures of Canada, especially the ones that revolve around certain historical calamities. The "chaos" that follows a disaster often creates a gap between how it exists within the individual memories (of the victims) and how it is documented as a part of history. Thus, these narratives are often imbued with a plurality born out of multiple perspectives, nullifying the notion of one "true" version of the incidents. For a country like Canada that boasts of its multiculturalism and yet has borne witness to incidents that reek of racial discrimination, such narratives are instrumental in understanding the politics of history writing in such a nation. Two of the starkest examples of such incidents are perhaps the internment of the Japanese immigrants following the Pearl Harbour bombing of 1941 and the discriminatory attitude towards the Indian (especially Sikh) immigrants in the aftermath of the Air India disaster of 1985. In both *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa and *The Sorrow and the Terror* by Bharati Mukherjee the motif of "chaos" acts as a catalyst, a plot motivator and also as succour. For the two immigrant communities in question, the psychological, social and political "chaos" ensued within and without, has been instrumental in shaping their self-image as the citizens of Canada. In both the texts, the "chaos" becomes a key to understanding the new diasporic individual born out of these traumatic experiences—someone who has given up much of his/her ethnic culture in an effort to appear less dislocated and be accepted by the mainstream population of the "New country", and yet is made to feel like an "outsider" in times of acute crisis. The motif brings back the ripples of the very basic question: "who are they?" No matter how much an individual would like to believe that "Life is a story... You can choose your story..." (Yann Martel's "Life of Pi"), the motif of the chaos also resonates with the question: "Can you"? My paper aims to explore how the motif of "chaos" shapes memory and history in *Obasan* and *The Sorrow and the Terror,* thereby addressing the issues of identity crisis, belongingness and the plurality of perspectives found in diasporic literature of Canada.

Keywords: Diaspora, Multiculturalism, Immigrant identity, Chaos.

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* is essentially concerned with the politics of memory and remembrance that play an integral role in tracing the protagonist Naomi Nakane's chaotic past, the physical and metaphysical mayhem that her family along with other Japanese alien and Japanese Canadian families; faced in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbour Incident that continued even after the culmination of Second World War. Bharati Mukherjee introduces her work *The Sorrow and the Terror* as an account that retells "the story and clarifies the issues" pertaining to The Air India disaster of 1985 honouring "the 329 lives, each of them a lawsuit without limits, something unpayable except in the currency of shared remorse". She emphatically states at the very inception of her introduction: "We saw it then, and we see it now, as fundamentally an immigration tragedy with terrorist overtones". Both the writers deal with a series of tumultuous situations that question the stability of a diasporic identity in a foreign land. Authors and thinkers like Derek Walcott have argued that the migrant often possesses a double consciousness, a leftover native one and a First World one.[1] Kogawa's work is fictional with autobiographical overtones while Mukerjee's is a factual retelling using history and archives seen through the lens of memory. Both the works thus provide the reader with a plurality of perspectives owing to their narratives techniques. This plurality is furthered through the motif of "chaos" that acts as catalyst, plot motivator and succour in both the novels. But before I go on to explain how the narratives crack open the complicated concept of diasporic identity, one must understand the notion of multiculturalism that Canada strives to live up to with almost existentialist perseverance.

Multiculturalism is a reality in many cosmopolitan cities in the face of globalisation that in turn fosters hybrid identities. Canada's "multiculturalism" is a mosaic of ethnic ghettos that resonate with the echo of "tolerance". Canada distinguishes itself by reasserting that they do not stuff everyone into the "melting pot" like the US. Bharati Mukherjee states in an interview that the "proliferation of ethnic ghettos... can be very very dangerous... The more alienated the new non-European immigrants feel the more they become the seething hot bed of terrorism, trouble and potential violence".[2] Joy Kogawa mentions in an interview: "In Canada the multicultural program gives a grant to this or that group, and that's the pie. We fight each other to make sure we get our grant, and our voices are kept distinct and separate from each other, controllable, smaller and less united."[3] Canada in a way, thrives on the fundamental purist conceptualisation of the freedom of expression— "segregation" and "tolerance".

However, this ideology is contested by the effective and reliable workings of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) that has the potential to intervene in a criminal judicial proceeding and declare a judge impotent in his own courtroom. This curbs the civil liberties of the Canadian citizens who bear this either by being quietly supportive or through

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1.Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Delhi: Pearson. 2010. Pg 179

2. *'Diasporas': Bharati Mukherjee: an interview with Runar Vignission.* Journal of the South Pacific Associations for the Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. Ed.Vijay Mishra. Number 34-35(1993).
3. *'In writing I keep breathing, I keep living...'* from *Sounding Differences.* Pg.159.

ignorance. Such a legal system coupled with the various administrative measures like the grants for the minority communities pose the question whether the bits of the "mosaic" standout distinctly and completely obliterating the picture from the fore. Another essential point derived from this is, accounts that serve as history in a country like Canada can be manipulated by the government. *The Sorrow and the Terror* provides instances in the account where the alleged "Singh" have been associated with officials of the country and the judicial trials of such a "Singh" have been stopped by a mere declaration of an individual that he is a member of the CSIS and the accused cannot be questioned further. Such muddled execution of justice reaffirms the motif of "chaos" that serves as a primary symbol in narratives of immigrant literature.

Aunt Emily from *Obasan* is an extension of Muriel Kitagawa. Kitagawa's letters serve as archives that trace the history of what happened after the Pearl Harbour incident. The power of speech that issues forth from the letters is what empowers Emily's voice. *Obasan* vividly recounts the wartime experiences through Aunt Emily's journal that contains an entry dated March 2, 1942: "[T]he great shock" according to this entry, "is this: we are all being forced to leave. All of us. Not a single person of the Japanese race who lives in the 'protected area' will escape" (*Obasan* 85).[4] While the government provided a number of incentives and schemes for relocation of people of Japanese descent, Japan on the other hand objected to such a shift. This inevitably leads to another situation of mayhem when the identity of immigrants and their belongingness is ripped to shreds — where do they belong? Where do they go? Canada faced with criticism for its policy of dislocation tried a new trick — "dispersal" instead of "dislocation" — helps to blend in. Really? What Naomi faces whenever she encounters a stranger is the question "Where do you come from?"At the crux of the problematic situation of identity crisis lies the urge in Naomi's voice when she recalls: "That's the one sure-fire question I always get from strangers. People assume when they meet me that I'm a foreigner"(*Obasan* 7). She seems to regret that she hasn't been able to wash off her "Jap" image like Stephen has. Many of Bharati Mukherjee's "Singh"-s assume a British first name like "John Singh" for instance. What the country aspired through "dispersal", it nailed in through the blending of the "other" by a complete mixing of their "original" identities. It created, as Kogawa puts it, "identity haircoats" that makes one synthetically Canadian. As Aunt Emily aptly puts it: "We weren't allowed to return to the West Coast like that. We've never recovered from the dispersal policy. But of course that was the government's whole idea – to make sure we'd never be visible again" (*Obasan* 34). Bharati Mukherjee's husband, and co-author of *The Sorrow and the Terror*, Clark Blaise was born of Canadian parents in North Dakota so that he could have an American citizenship. There are many who share the notion of *a citizenship of advantage* and therefore migrate to a different country like Clark's parents did. The book recounts the manner in which the Air India Disaster was seen by the Canadian state — "Sad as it is, it's not really our problem."(*The Sorrow and the Terror* 203) The prime minister's office was "still" referring to the disaster as a tragedy for the "Indo-Canadian community". The scenario is best summed up in the words of Roland de Corneille: "Not enough Canadians are deeply touched. Not too many realize it was Canadians who were

4. Nieguth, Tim. *"An awfully unwieldy business". State territoriality, power, and Joy Kogawa's Obasan.*Pg 112.

killed. There still remains racism, a separatism that the loss affected them, and not us."(*The Sorrow and the Terror* 203) Words like "Japanese-Canadians" or "Canadians of Indian Origin" serve to re-establish the *foreignness* of the immigrants even when they are not the first generation settlers. The narratives therefore tell the tale of the "other" who is stripped bare of his identity especially at the face of a chaotic situation and what ultimately belongs to him is the "chaos" that he is subjected to — the internment camps and the sufferings of the Japanese Canadians are their own, their succour, that provide them a security called *community*. Likewise the Sikhs are united in the violence, either through acceptance or through denial — every "Singh" is marked with the Air India Disaster. The Hindus who died and those that live on with the memory of the dead are fused into a unified whole. The "chaos" acts as a catalyst when it brings forth the creation of the narrative and its self revealing title as in the case of *The Sorrow and the Terror* or when it builds the characters like Naomi and Stephen— one that lives through symbiotic association with the "chaos" and therefore appears mystical, while the other that in an attempt to transgress it creates a *new identity* in a *New Country*. The "chaos" undoubtedly acts as a plot motivator in both the narratives, of course we know George Bernard Shaw said — no conflict, no drama— and therefore every narrative that lives up to its refection of the drama of existence has to record conflicts and "chaos".

What arise from these immigrant literatures is the questions: *who are they?* —that can be best answered through the motif of "chaos". Joy Kogawa says: "In what I'm writing now the greyness and the fog and the confusion of not knowing very clearly can be a way to survive within a situation where the pain is too great, where denial is necessary in order not to be blinded by the truth of the sun. So these days I'm doing much more in-depth exploration of the fog, the mist, the confusion."[5] She indeed does justice to the sense of feeling phenomenalised through her narrative. In her work, "the facts of one's feelings" triumph over "the facts as such".[6] The "chaos"-without is efficiently portrayed through the "chaos"-within. Mukherjee's work uses the facts in vivid detail, in an attempt to clear the dust of confusion that shrouds the Air India Disaster of 1985.

Nakayama-sensei says, "You will be told what you are made ready to hear." But when we are slapped with the truth, it almost knocks us unconscious. Naomi realises what happened to her mother but she recedes into a cocoon of memory again. She feels her mother living, through her— or, re-phrased: in her mind —"I close my eyes./ Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you."(*Obasan* 240) I believe the continuous hammering with the truth in Mukherjee's work grinds it into the hearts of the readers. Blends it in, like a pestle mixing ingredients in a mortar.

The narratives culminate in mystery rather than providing a denouement of the central motif of "chaos". While we cannot deny that not knowing what actually happened is terrible.

5. "Joy Kogawa talks to Karlyn Koh. The Heart-Of-The-Matter Questions". *The Other Woman.*

6. *'In writing I keep breathing, I keep living...'* from *Sounding Differences.* Pg.156.

A denial of the truth is probably the only way to conform to the world around. Kogawa says: "When you're in denial you can go on with your life — it's a great survival tactic... And I look back and I see that I have lived my life in denial and that's what I write about. It enabled me to thrive to the extent that I did. But the fog is the denial, the fog is surviving. It's sort of like the atmosphere that surrounds the world: it keeps us safe, it keeps the sun from coming through and destroying us. The sun is the truth. I mean the truth is what enables things to grow. But too much of it kills us."[7]

"A foreign carrier had crashed off foreign seas."(*The Sorrow and the Terror* 174) This statement practically sums up the diasporic situation of an immigrant Canadian citizen facing a chaotic or problematic situation in the country he has a citizenship of. He is still *foreign* and his problems are still *related to his foreignness*. Aunt Emily can try to be outspoken regarding the Japanese problems like Ujjal Dosanjh is about Khalistanis and the supporter who assaulted and battered him. But in the end, the needle turns to the victim and enquires whether he played the role of a "provocateur". Why can't he be just a "Canadian" when he has legally attained the citizenship of Canada? Why are his problems termed *minority community issues*? Canada's "mosaic" ideology aimed at honouring the individualistic identity traits somehow opposes hybridity that is the inevitable consequence of diasporic communities in a multicultural nation in the face of globalisation. The notion of *blending in* is often socially shunned and the proliferation of ethnic ghettos prevented through adhering to social constructs. This makes the diasporic situation a pandemonium of brooding hatred and insecurity.

From *Obasan* (Toronto:Penguin 1983)

> Where do any of us come from in this cold country? Oh Canada, whether it is admitted or not, we come from you we come from you. From the same soil, the slugs slime and bogs and twigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and sloughs, untended and spindly. We erupt in the valleys and mountainsides, in small towns and back alleys, sprouting upside-down on the prairies, our hair wild as spider's legs, our feet rooted nowhere. We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of unlikely planting. Where do we come from Obasan? We come from cemeteries full of skeletons with wild roses in their grinning teeth. We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. We come from Canada, this land that is like every land, filled with the wise, the fearful, the compassionate, the corrupt.

The extract effectively sums up the Canadian immigrant situation.

7. "Joy Kogawa talks to Karlyn Koh. The Heart-Of-The-Matter Questions". *The Other Woman.*

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