CSCanada
Canadian Social Science
Vol. 15, No. 7, 2019, pp. 70-75
DOI:10.3968/11220

ISSN 1712-8056[Print]
ISSN 1923-6697[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

"Peter Pan Syndrome" or Psychological Therapy: Fairy Tales and Self-Maturity in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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Received 23 March 2019; accepted 11 June 2019
Published online 26 July 2019

Abstract

Fairy tale as a special literary genre is gaining much attention in recent decades. Apart from serving as a popular material for postmodern rewriting, it also can be interpreted from the perspective of children's psychological development. In Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan*, Naomi, a silence Japanese Canadian girl exiled during WWII, is constantly intoxicated in fairy tales and folklores like Momotaro, Peter Rabbit, Snow White, Goldilocks, and Three bear and other stories. By re-narrating the relentless world as a little fairy tale-teller, she once attempted to evade in the imagery bubble when encountering sexual molestation, vicious racial discrimination, identity conundrum and traumatic experiences of evacuation from coastal Vancouver to ghost town Slocan and Baker farm Graton during the WWII. Nevertheless, in each story Naomi absorbs the nutrition from imagination as an alternate facet of reality and experiences self-maturity. Therefore, whether the fairy tale serves as an unrealistic utopia for the escapist "Peter Panner", or a dose of therapeutic potion to sooth her anxieties and despair rooted in the historical hardships is open to investigating.

Key words: Japanese Canadian; World War II; Evacuation; Fairy tales; Psychological maturity

Meng, S. (2019). "Peter Pan Syndrome" or Psychological Therapy: Fairy Tales and Self-Maturity in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*. *Canadian Social Science, 15*(7), 70-75. Available from: http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/11220
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11220

> We tell stories because, in order to cope with the present and to face the future, we have to create the past, both as time and space, through narrating it.
>
> W.F.H. NICOLAISEN

Fairy tales, no matter in form of bed-time stories or comic books, are the most visible entertainment for children. It also helps the children to perceive and understand the world. Being described as a kid "fed on milk and Momotaro" (Kogawa, 1994), Naomi in Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* unexceptionally roams in the world of various fairy tales and folklores like Momotaro, Peter Rabbit, Snow White, Goldilocks, and Three bear and other stories. By viewing the cruel reality from the imaginary lens, she is mentally shielded by fairy tales from the haunting shadow of sexual molestation, vicious racial discrimination, identity conundrum and traumatic experiences of evacuation from coastal Vancouver to ghost town Slocan and Baker farm Graton during the WWII. Meanwhile, as an atypical "Peter Panner" who herself is a child and being stuck in time, she constantly "sees the adult world as very problematic" and rather indulge in her fairyland and "stay in that state of privilege" (Ortega). Therefore, whether the fairy tale serves as an unrealistic utopia for the escapist "Peter Panner", or a dose of therapeutic potion to sooth her anxieties and despair rooted in the historical hardships is open to investigating. However, regardless of the double function of fairy tales, through the process of internalizing and externalizing these fantasies, Naomi matures painstakingly by re-narrating these stories as a representation tangled with the past.

Thus, Naomi's vision of the past is "recreated" with the fairy tale element. This can be seen as "a symbolic act" which "is grasped as the imaginary resolution of real contradiction" (Jameson, 2013). Taking a self-reflective posture to pierce into the past traumatic experiences, the ambivalent hyphenated Japanese-Canadian can take a forgiving stance and reconciliate with the past and take a new journey of self-redemption, self-discovery, and maturity.

MOMOTARO, JAPANESENESS AND THE GREENHOUSE FLOWER IN VANCOUVER

During the tranquil pre-eventual life in Vancouver, Naomi recollects that "there is confidence and laughter, music and mealtimes, games and storytelling" (Kogawa, 1994) in the house where she shared a special intimacy with her mother linked by the repetitious storytelling of Momotaro: "My arms are flung around my mother as she lies beside me and I breathe in her powdery perfume as she continues her chant" (Kogawa, 1994). In this sense, Naomi integrated her experiences of bed-time stories into her treasured memory with Mother, who is always patient, caring and "yasashi". The story of Momotaro to some extent represents her carefree early childhood as a "greenhouse flower" in Vancouver when:

> I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food. If I am weary, every place is a bed. No food that is distasteful must be eaten and there is neither praise nor blame for the body's natural functions. […] A sweater covers me before there is any chill and if there is pain there is care simultaneously (Kogawa, 1994).

Moreover, the story of Momotaro retold by Mother and Grandma Kato conveying a traditional "Japaneseness", which imperceptibly shapes Naomi's moral judgment and transmits the social code of a real "Japanese". For Jack Zipes (1991), the fairy tale for children is inevitably "infused by the ideological viewpoint of the individual author". As a genre associated with educational purpose since its emergence in Europe, the oral folktale is "appropriated and converted into a type of literary discourse about morals, values and manners" (Cullingford, 1998). Echoing the latter mentioned "Ninomiya Kinjiro" who is the symbol of Japanese's diligence and righteousness, Momotaro represents the pursuit for honor in Japanese culture: "what matters in the end, what matters above all, […] is that Momotaro behaves with honor. At all times what matters is to act with a fine intent. To do otherwise is shameful and brings dishonor to all" (Kogawa, 1994).

Furthermore, Momotaro story also exemplifies the attentive silence, consideration, and self-sacrifice innate in Japanese spirit.

> The time comes when Momotaro must go and silence falls like feathers of snow all over the rice-paper hut. Inside, the hands are slow. Grandmother kneels at the table forming round rice balls, […] she offers him the lunch for his journey. There are no tears and no touch. Grandfather and Grandmother are careful, as he goes, not to weight his pack with their sorrow (Kogawa, 1994).

Such qualities also resonate with the practice of the Mother, Grandma Kato, Uncle and Obasan, all of whom express their love by concealing the disfiguration and death of her mother and "try to shield Stephen and Naomi from grief" (Cheung, 1993). However, Naomi seems to confuse at such painful effort of "restraining emotions" (104) and "always honoring the wishes of others before our own". Combining Aunt Emily's claim that "Momotaro is a Canadian story" (Kogawa, 1994), she falls into the third place of cultural identity where the seeking for her lost self is endless. Therefore, for Issei and Nisei, honor, attentiveness and thoughtfulness are the inalienable national traits for their descendants, but further perplex the sense of belonging and identity of the Canadian-born Sansei.

Many critics also interpret the story of Momotaro as the foreshadowing of Naomi's life experience. As Cheung (1993) notes, the tale "speaks more truly to [Naomi's] life", and Helena Grice (1999) considers it as "both histories of parental loss and separation". Like Momotaro who emerged from peach and is adopted by an old childless couple, Naomi was taken care of by Obasan and Uncle during the absence of her parents. Entering Lacan's "Mirror stage", Naomi struggled to create an ideal version of herself according to Momotaro, the national hero who shares similar experiences with her, which "gives pre-verbal impetus to the creation of narcissistic phantasies" (Felluga, n.d., 2015).

The story of Momotaro also lays a fundamental basis for Naomi's reliance on fairy tales' power of fantasy in the future. As a typical magic folktale, according to Marie-Louise Tenèze's "Du Conte merveilleux comme genre" (On the Magic Folk Tale as Genre), Momotaro has an identical succession of events:

> The hero of the magic folk tale ventures, alone and far from his familiar surroundings, to the perilous fringe of an exceptional experience capable of supplying him with a personal provision of power, his insertion into the world—and thus, there is a magic solution to the absurd and desperate endeavor to leave the social order which is played out in the universe of fiction (Marie-Louise, 1970).

With the similar routine, Momotaro steps on an unknown journey and magically gains enormous power by eating the homemade rice balls and easily defeated the ogres with the help of his animal friends. Though these magic and fantasy are sometimes despised by some adults as "false information" estranging children from reality, Bettelheim (1978) grants the necessity of magic for children. The fairy tale conforms the way of how children perceive and experience the world, which also explains its convincing and attractive power. Thus, children can "gain much better solace from a fairy tale than they can from an effort to comfort themselves based on adult reasoning and viewpoints". In this way, the children always firmly believe the eternal happy ending in the fairy tales and its embedded moral economy, that is, good is rewarded and evil is punished. Immersing in the world of fairy tales even before she can talk, Naomi profoundly influenced by such magical fantasy. That also deciphers her obsession with fairy tales and child literature as a comfort of harsh reality in her latter days of ghettoization and exile.

Hence, related to her happiest family time in Vancouver, Momotaro can always arise nostalgia in Naomi. Naomi, as a "Peter Panner", strived for being

"a child for a longer time" as "we must grow up is an unavoidable sadness" (Kogawa, 1994). Through the repetitious narrating of this story, Naomi internalized the "Japaneseness" inserted in the story and formed the primary fairy-tale view.

SNOW WHITE, TRAUMATIC SEXUAL MOLESTATION AND A WANDERER IN THE DARKNESS

With the debut of her white pedophilia neighbor the Old Man Gower, Naomi's intimacy with Mother is disrupted by his sexual molestation and Naomi's withdrawal of this shameful secret.

In Mr. Gower's bathroom, Naomi imagined herself as the "Snow White in the forest, unable to run. He is the forest full of eyes and arms. He is the tree root that trips Snow White. He is the lightning flashing through the dark sky" (Kogawa, 1994). She amplified the Snow-White story with the horrific animated forest which attempts to prison her in the darkness. As the fairy tale "cannot be defined one-dimensionally" (Zipes, 1988), Naomi was rewriting her version of fairy tales. By blurring the border line of animate and inanimate objects, she sought a vent to her fear for the sinister world and tried to exclude such beastlike behavior out of the sphere of human beings.

In addition to some parallel plots, Naomi was much situated in an isolated and helpless plight compared with the fortunate Snow White. Being aided by the hunter who was sent by the Queen to murder her, Snow White had a narrow escape, whereas the passing Stephen was bribed with a single penny from Mr. Gower and failed to notice his desperate sister. Moreover, the seven warm-hearted dwarfs never appear while the weak and ineffectual posture of her father gave her a fatal punch. When Old Man Gower appears in the dark living room talking with Naomi's father, she depicts Mr. Gower "seems more powerful than Father, larger and more at home even though this is our house" (Kogawa, 1994), which vanished her last hope of walking out of the darkness.

In this way, Naomi suffered on three different levels from the patriarchal power, both the sexual abuse from the social-dominated white and the indifferent ignorance from the two males of her own ethnicity. As Bruno Bettelheim (1978) argues in his *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, "fairy tales usually begin with the child's life in some manner has reached an impasse"; furthermore, "in some fairy tales the hero has to search, travel, and suffer through years of a lonely existence" as "in 'Snow White' it is the years Snow White spends with the dwarfs which stand for her time of troubles, of working through problems, her period of growth". Naomi naturalized her hardships as an inevitable trial before her final arrival of a happy ending. Thus, when Aunt Emily read her a story from *The Book of Golden Deeds* "which is filled with tales of martyrs and brave children and people going through torment and terror" (Kogawa, 1994), she asked herself , "Could I hide in a wagon of hay and not cry out if I were stabbed by a bayonet?" since she has gradually internalized the bravery and endurance qualities of the fairy-tale heroes and disciplines herself.

These values inherited from the fairy tales shaped Naomi's world view and are applied in her judgment. Naomi once imagined her family members becoming the protagonists of *The Book of Golden Deeds*, she naturally justified that Aunt Emily is not fit to be a fairy tale heroine, "Mother, it seems to me, could. So could Grandma Kato or Obasan. But not, I think, Aunt Emily, though perhaps that is not so. She is too often impatient and flustered, her fingers jerking her round wire-rimmed glasses up her short nose (Kogawa, 1994)". This illustrates that the virtuous deeds advocated by these institutionalized fairy tales and the society is imperceptibly imposing, brainwashing children to narrow down their criteria of the female model as tamed, restrained and self-sacrificing.

All in all, haunted by the traumatic memory of sexual molestation, Naomi was further isolated in the sphere of fairyland and partly assimilated by some sexism ideology in the old Snow-White story.

PETER RABBIT, MISFORTUNE AND "MAJIME" BABY

When Naomi overheard the conversation between father and Aunt Emily about her father's deteriorating health condition and the imminent expulsion, she chose to retreat to her fairy tale. "All this talk is puzzling and frightening. I cradle the rubber ball against my cheek and stare up at the white tufts like tiny rabbit tails stuck all over the bottom of the mattress. I am thinking of Peter Rabbit hopping through the lettuce patch when I hear Stephen's lopsided hop as he comes galloping down the stairs" (Kogawa, 1994). By immersing in her stories, she blocked the scary "My time is up" outside her own cocoon cut off with the cruel outside world.

However, almost opposite to the mischievous and disobedient Peter Rabbit who is chased about the garden of Mr. McGregor but escapes and returns home to his mother, Naomi was struck by the departure of her mother and become increasingly silence. As Aunt Emily recalled, "You never spoke. You never smiled. You were so 'majime.' What a serious baby" (Kogawa, 1994). Silence is her unique weapon to defend herself and express her resistance.

When encountering the first expulsion, Naomi initiated a path of blocked but warm space with her favorite fictional friends. Wrapped herself in her cocoon woven by fairy tales, she escaped into her autistic but soothing fantasy and secluded from the outer world.

GOLDILOCKS, ENIGMATIC IDENTITY, AN OUTSIDER IN THE THIRD PLACE

One day after their settlement in Slocan, the song "Silver Threads among the Gold" reminds her of the story of Goldilocks who has "long golden ringlets […] one day comes to a quaint house in the woods lived in by a family of bears. Clearly, we are that bear family in this strange house in the middle of the woods. I am Baby Bear, whose chair Goldilocks breaks, whose porridge Goldilocks eats, whose bed Goldilocks sleeps in. Or perhaps this is not true and I am really Goldilocks after all." (Kogawa, 1994)

Once again, like her narration of Snow White, Naomi herself became the characters in the fairy tales. Nevertheless, the story of Goldilocks somehow is more appropriate to be the paratext of her life. Both Snow White and Goldilocks are lost themselves in the forest, but Snow White is rescued by the hunter, accompanied with the dwarfs, and marries her prince in the end as a happy-ending story whereas the sequel of Goldilocks' flee into the forest is pendent and enigmatic. Bettelheim annotates:

> The contrast in Goldilocks is between the well-integrated family represented by the bears, and the outsider in search of herself. The happy but naïve bears have no identity problems: each knows exactly where he stands in relation to the other family members, a fact made more obvious by naming them Father, Mother, and Baby Bear (1978).

The Goldilocks' puzzlement of her identity and role in the family echoes Naomi's identity predicament as an in-between of Canadian and Japanese. Witnessing the white students bullied Stephen and killed a chicken, Naomi cried out, "I hate school. I hate running the gauntlet of white kids in the woods close to home" (Kogawa, 1994). Being slandered as "gimpy Jap" by the white with xenophobia, Naomi's family was also despised by other Japanese Canadians for his father's tuberculosis. Being an outsider of both sides, Naomi first endeavored to "running away from a problem which "seems the easiest way out when confronted with what seems to be too difficult or unsolvable a predicament" as Goldilocks' flee from home (Bettelheim, 1978). As "a grade-two reader full of fairies, sitting in the forest very still and waiting for one fairy tiny as an insect to come flying through the tall grasses and lead [her] down to… the place where [her] mother and father are hiding" (Kogawa, 1994), she dreamed of an exit for hardships and an entrance to the gold old day by reuniting with her parents.

Naomi's reading herself as Goldilocks is also problematic. As she remarks: "It does not occur to me to wonder why Mother would have liked this song. We do not have silver threads among the gold" (Kogawa, 1994). Different from the unsophisticated little girl in Aunt Emily's diary who thought herself "is same as neighbors" (Kogawa, 1994), she began to recognize her distinct appearance—the yellow skin and black hair which is later bantered as "black head" —as a trace for "visible minority". (Cuder-Dominguez et al, 2010)

The color yellow connected multiple fairy tales is a crucial image in *Obasan*. As Pecola's worship to the blue eye in Toni Morrison *The Bluest Eye*, the blond hair is also a symbolic sign in western culture. In fairy tales the golden hair of the protagonists is prevalent: much more than Goldilocks and Rapunzel's magical and powerful long hair which "could bear the weight of prince or witch" (Kogawa, 1994). When western scholar explains this phenomenon as "representing a live gold, delicate threads seemingly radiating from the human head – physical receptacle and main tool of our spirit – to a supernatural world" (Heuscher, 1974), it recapitulates a hegemonic western discourse which imposes the mainstream aesthetics on the overall qualification of being heroine. In *Little Tales for Little Folk*, yellow is not only the color of heroine's hair, but also the color of vulnerable "Chicken Little" in the book cover which will grow into a white hen and "peck yellow chicks to death", and the "small and weak" (Kogawa, 1994) yellow pawns in the Yellow Peril game. By denying her skin color and saying "I am not yellow" (Kogawa, 1994), Naomi instinctively "distasted for the role of the victim (despite her intuitive identification with it)" (Cheung, 1993). Being stuck in the third place of identity, Naomi seems, on the one hand, realized her identity conundrum; on the other hand, she desired to stay strong and hopeful like Rapunzel.

During the process of reading fairy tales, Naomi resonated with them, escapes into them and finally gets empowered by them. As she widely imagined in the bosom of her long-absent father, "I am Minnie and Winnie in a seashell, resting on a calm seashore. I am Goldilocks, I am Momotaro returning. I am leaf in the wind restored to its branch, child of my father come home. The world is safe once more and Chicken Little is wrong. The sky is not falling down after all" (Kogawa, 1994), she interpreted these tales into the images of homecoming and even questions the fidelity of them.

Although Naomi still interwove the reality with fairy tales, she started to walks out of them and transformed them into her spiritual nutrition. With the power of fantasy, she embarked her voyage of self-discovery.

INDIAN FOLKTALE, "SLOW-CAN-GO", AND MULTICULTURISM

During their sojourn in Slocan, Rough Lock Bill told Naomi and Kenji the story of a brave Indian who led his tribe to resettle there. His storytelling conforms the oral tradition of Indian culture and also inherits the Indian philosophy of "slow-can-go". The entrance of Indian folklore symbolizes the "Canadian mosaic" which advocates "the inter-ethnic and inter-racial cooperation, reconciling the differences instead of assimilating into a narrative white European identity" (Cuder-Dominguez et al, 2010). Hence, the intruding of Indian folklore can

be interpreted as an undermining force to the dominated White Supremacy in the sphere of fairy tale narrative.

Both stuck in the subordinate power position, Rough Lock Bill's negation on "all this fuss about skin" (Kogawa, 1994) expressed an anti-racism attitude. Nevertheless, those who have occupied a positive position hardly abandon their domineering posture and sense of superiority whole-heartedly.

On all accounts, Rough Lock Bill's "color blindness" as well as the optimism within the "slow-can-go" story nurtured a cheering spirit within the heart of kids tortured by their identity predicament.

ORPHAN STORIES, DISENCHANTMENT, TOUGH DAYS IN GRANTON

Getting no comfort from tough days in Granton sugar-beet fields, Naomi gradually dismayed the fairy tales and resorted into some children literature like *Anne of Green Gables, The Secret Garden, Girl of the Limberlost, The Prince and the Pauper* which are rife with lonely orphan girls like herself. Being disenchanted from the fairy tales, she managed to find the answer to break through the dilemma from the books whose protagonists face the similar conundrum.

Stepping into the adulthood, even though Naomi always tried to get rid of the burden of history and hopes to "turn the page and move on" (Kogawa, 1994), the fairy tales entangle with past are absorbed into part of her cognitive, perceptive habits and world view. Many years later, when she saw off Stephen at the train station, she "was feeling proud of him and thinking of Momotaro going off to conquer the world" (Kogawa, 1994).

However, this profound and lingering influence of fairy tales does not confine her in the fantasy, instead she no longer takes them as a cave to hide but as imperfect nutrition. When she was questioned embarrassedly by her students about her spinsterhood, she reacted in a self-deprecating and sarcastic way. "Let the questions come. Why indeed are there two of us unmarried in our small family? Must be something in the blood. A crone-prone syndrome. We should hire ourselves out for a research study, Aunt Emily and I" (Kogawa, 1994). She did not wait for her Prince Charming to rescue her anymore, but directly confronted the bitterness and awkwardness in life. This is what fairy tales taught her –not only the sweet bubbling fantasy, but the bitterness of growing up.

CONCLUSION

Fairy tales, folklore, and even children literature are the central motif throughout the whole novel. Even the title, "Obasan", which refers Aya Obasan, can be interpreted as a universal Japanese fairy godmother who is always loving, diligent and hardworking. As Naomi comments, "She is the old woman of many Japanese legends, alone and waiting in her ancient time for the honor that is an old person's reward". Even though being a silent child, Naomi is telling her stories and retelling fairy tales in her own way: she is Snow White in the horrible Vancouver backyard forest, the mischievous Peter Rabbit overhearing the secret code, the Baby Bear whose home is broken in by strangers and Goldilocks who lost her way in Slocan woods.

On the one hand, Fairy tales, as a cultural production, is constantly revised and appropriated in reaction to the needs and conflicts of people in every epoch. Arranging a series of classic fairy tales echoing the historical contexts behind the psychological changes of little Naomi, Kogawa's narrative exceeds the sphere of the individual history of an exiled family to the collective history of all the victimized Japanese-Canadian during the WWII. Just as Zipes (1991) noted, "we write our own texts to gain a sense not simply of what has happened in reality but also of what has happened on psychological, economic, cultural, and other levels to free ourselves of the dictates of other sociohistorical texts that have prescribed and ordered our thinking". By presenting one's own version of history, Kogawa does not mechanically repeat the traumatic past, but implies the possibility of jumping out of the monolithic writing of history and gaining an emancipating power from it.

On the other hand, fairy tales are never universal in the sense of their various cultural soils nurturing them. For Propp and Lüthi, Tenèze, those tales all express the same thing, some kind of universal statement about the plight of humanity. Nevertheless, such methodology strips the different cultures and even the underlying ethnic significance sticking onto those stories. The Indian legend "slow-can-go", the Japanese folklore Momotaro all stand as the precious cultural heritage of minority group surviving from the Western dominating tradition. Labeling them as universal has no difference from depriving the cultural integrity of ethnic minority. However, living in this cultural mosaic world can be another challenge for those in-betweenness. As Maria Tatar (2015) in her *Off with their Heads: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* said: "We create new tales not only by retelling familiar stories, but also by reinterpreting them. … The prominence of certain stories is in itself symptomatic of cultural production—of the way in which culture constitutes itself by constituting us". Surrounded by Japanese folklores, Western fairy tales, and even Indian legends, Naomi's identity floats within the spectrum of Canadian cultures.

In the journey of Naomi's self-discovery and maturity, these "therapeutic, miraculous, and beautiful" fairy tales equipped with "three nurturing and civilizing qualities: recovery, escape, consolation." (Zips, 1975), which sheltered her and empowered her during the agonizing period poked by gender and racial discrimination,

internment, and absent parents alternatively. in the current world, we still need magic and fantasy. As C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien said, "Myth-making continues. The renaissance of wonder has reached maturity. And we need it. The conflict between good and evil—absolute evil—in which the child heroes of fantasy are caught up and taxed to the limit of their endurance" (Lochhead, 1977). The point is, with the healing power of fairy tales, Peter Panners need to leave the "Peter Pan" temptation behind, diving into the unmeasurable pool of life in a high-spirited mood.

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