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The Fictionalization of History and the Personal Stories in *Obasan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Introduction

I. Theoretical Framework

The nature of history<sup>1</sup> has always been studied and analyzed from different perspectives throughout the centuries. Following a postmodern<sup>2</sup> position, many theorists have explored history and have questioned it critically in the light of the present. The postmodern theorist Brenda Marshall has stated, “History in the postmodern moment becomes histories and stories.” (4) Scholars have been interested in the stories that are not told and need to be reconstructed to reveal other stories that have been hidden and silenced for a long time, and, in some cases, they were written with ideological implications on the part of a dominant group in society. According to Marshall’s theory:

Postmodernism is about stories not told, retold, untold. History as it never was. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, eradicated. It is about the refusal to see history as linear, as leading straight up to today in some recognizable pattern- all set for us to make sense of. It is about chance. It is about power. It is about information. And more information. And more. And that is just a little bit about what postmodernism [is]. (4)

Postmodern thinkers who made a great contribution to the historical narrative<sup>3</sup> like Hayden White have also problematized the representation<sup>4</sup> of the past in a critical way. It was believed that the historian was able to provide an accurate reconstruction of the past events in the form of documents. However, the historian’s attempt to represent the past started to be questioned since his historical narrative included some facts but excluded other important data, and his personal interpretation of the events did not coincide with the

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<sup>1</sup>According to White, every history is shaped by its “metahistory”; that is to say, the archetypal historical narrative that the historian uses to shape and structure a story about the past. (8)

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) defines postmodern as “an incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). He made reference to the fall of the great narratives that men used to make sense of the world and explain the truth. There is not an absolute truth but different ones. (Marshall 6)

<sup>3</sup>The historical narrative can be defined as “verbal fictions, the content of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.” (White 82)

<sup>4</sup>White has stated in relation to history that “every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications.” (69)

objectivity of his work. As Carl Becker stated “the facts in history do not exist for any historian until he creates them.” (Hutcheon 122)

Even though historians should portray reality with an objective view, it has been stated that there are more than one correct representation of the same event. An important work that is related to the writing of history is the one written by Dominick LaCapra who claimed that the documents created by the historian cannot be recognized as “neutral evidence for reconstructing phenomena.” (Hutcheon 122) The historian also used narrative techniques in order to write about history. Consequently, many writers thought about the similarities between the historian’s and the literary writer’s work. According to E. L. Doctorow, both modes of writing are “cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained.” (Hutcheon 112) It can be said that these discourses aim at representing the world without subjectivity since they follow one line of thought.

In the postmodern era, some critics, such as White and Hutcheon among others have claimed that the limit between the historical and the literary discourses<sup>5</sup> does not have clear-cut boundaries. The distinction between the historical discourse and the fictional discourse consists in the identification of what can be recognized as real against what can be interpreted as part of the imagination. At this point, the historian is doing the same work that the novelist does since historians fictionalize history to explain some events that have affected the humankind in order to make sense of the world in the present. Some thinkers consider the historical narrative as a construction of the historical representation because the historian should interpret the data he is exposed to and has to provide an explanation of it. Furthermore, theorists have also pointed out that we can know the past through the historical documents that were constructed with subjectivity and ideological implications. The French philosopher Claude Levi-Strauss has argued that history is written for a purpose not only with an ideological aim but for a particular social group or public. (White 104)

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<sup>5</sup>In *Social, Discourse and Text Analysis* (2003), Norman Fairclough affirmed that “discourses are part of the social practices and can represent one part of the world from different perspectives.” (26)

The Canadian writer Hutcheon, who has coined the term ‘Historiographic metafiction,’ has also contributed to the theory of the Historical novel<sup>6</sup> in the twentieth century. Besides, she has provided a deep analysis of the similarities between the historical and literary representation. In Hutcheon’s theory, these modes of writing “are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure, and they appear to be equally intertextual...” (105) Postmodern theory does not suggest to go back to the past with nostalgia but it aims at reconstructing the past in a critical and self-reflexive way to open it up to the present. Umberto Eco claimed that “the postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past (...) must be revisited but with irony, not innocently.” (Hutcheon 90) Many postmodern writers such as E. L. Doctorow, Joy Kogawa and Kurt Vonnegut among others were interested in portraying the contradictions that the official history of some countries has, especially by reconstructing the stories of the protagonists that have usually undergone traumatic life experiences. These stories allow people who have suffered from a serious trauma to reveal the hidden facts that affected their own community and they aim at presenting the past with a critical inside towards the official story presented. Hutcheon has claimed that “the past really did exist, but we can ‘know’ the past today only through its texts, and therein lies the connection to the literary.” (128) This notion is essential to know that we can have access to the past in the form of the written texts and that we can establish relations between the literary and the historical worlds in these texts.

It is also relevant for my analysis to explain the term “deconstruction”. The poststructuralist French thinker, Jacques Derrida, developed a postmodern analysis based on philosophy, linguistics and literature. It was called deconstruction. In the deconstruction of a text, some meanings are foregrounded in order to put emphasis on the unrevealed or silenced meanings that the text pretends to hide. Poststructuralists like Derrida are against the notion that written texts present the truth. They argue that “all texts are opaque writing than approximate versions of direct speech.” (100) Following this approach, critics do not consider the text as a complete unity; they see it as incomplete with a lot of fissures and contradictions and they believe in the notion that meaning does not have an end. According

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<sup>6</sup>Hutcheon provided a definition of historical fiction “as that which is modelled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force.” (in the narrative and human destiny) (see Fleishman 1971) (Hutcheon 113)

to Glenn Ward, “Derrida is much more interested in how the meanings of texts can be plural and unstable than fixing them to a rigid structure.” (93) The meanings revealed in the texts can be reinterpreted and, by doing so, they contribute to problematizing history instead of taking some historical events for granted as it was before.

In postmodern fiction, writers resort to a number of narrative strategies<sup>7</sup> that allow them to exploit the historical and the literary discourses in the text. One of the strategies frequently employed is intertextuality<sup>8</sup>. It establishes a dialogue between texts and pretends to rewrite the past in a specific context. It also questions the text as an “autonomous entity” and suggests that it is made up of “multiple voices” and heterogeneous discourses. (126) According to Hutcheon, “the past once existed, but our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted.” (122) The writers have focused on this literary strategy to establish a dialogue between the past and the present and in the way the main characters struggle to retell their stories with their own voices in opposition to the official version provided by their country. There has been a confrontation against the homogeneity in the presentation of forms of experience. The French theorist Mikhail Bakhtin explained that “the polyphonic novel is not in favour of one official point of view since it presented us a world with a dialogic relationship.” (Allen 24) What it was stated before is relevant since it presents the idea of the plurality of voices in the text that provides different points of view in the historical narrative.

Another relevant strategy used to reconstruct the past is the mode of narration. According to Hutcheon, “historiographic metafiction appear to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view or an overtly controlling narrator.” (117) In most postmodern works, there is not a subject confident enough to narrate the past without contradictions and gaps. The protagonists are trying to reconstruct their personal stories in the light of the present and they do so by resorting to the written documents and experiences in order to provide a new version of the past events as a counter-discourse. The narrators are also the main characters in these postmodern novels but they are not the only ones involved in this historical event since some relevant information is given by other characters. The presence of other voices

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<sup>7</sup>Narrative strategies are techniques that the writers use to narrate the story, such as the narrative time, plot, and point of view among others.

<sup>8</sup>Following Hutcheon’s theory, “intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context.” (118)

contributes to making the narration unstable and, consequently, the official version of history is questioned from different perspectives.

The postmodern rethinking of history involves reconstructing the historical events in a contextualized present in order to make sense of the historical knowledge and to problematize the ontological and epistemological status of the historical fact that does not rely on objectivity towards past events. In the novels I will analyze, *Obasan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the nature of history is questioned by the protagonists who struggle to find the truth by going back to their past. I will examine the relationship between the historical and the literary discourses and the way they are explored in the novels. Following Derrida's work, I will focus on the concept of deconstruction since the protagonists aim at reconstructing their own stories against the official version of the Second World War. Furthermore, I will refer to the main narrative strategies that the writers use to narrate the events. In this case, the intertextuality and the modes of narration contribute to making the stories fragmented and incomplete.

## Analysis

### I. *Obasan*

In this historical novel, Kogawa<sup>9</sup> fictionalized the events that the Japanese Canadian community had suffered during the Second World War. The story is based on historical data and personal experiences that these people have silenced since this event happened. The writer concentrates on the narration of the events taken place during the internment, dispossession and relocation of the Japanese people in Canada. This new version is told from the perspective of a Japanese Canadian descent called Megumi Naomi Nakane (Sansei or third generation), a primary school teacher at the age of thirty six, who has decided to reconstruct her personal story by deconstructing the official history. The narration can be divided into three main stories: the past related with Naomi's childhood memories, the official documented version of the events in Canada during the Second World War, and the wartime experiences narrated in Aunt Emily's diary.

This novel can be recognized as one significant work of postmodern writing of Canadian history. The Japanese Canadian writer emphasized the fact that the historical knowledge of past events has to be revised critically. The author provides an alternative story made up of the experiences that the main character has undergone. Naomi's life experiences and testimony lead to the subjectivity that prevails throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Kogawa stated in the preface of the novel that "although this novel is based on historical events, and many of the persons named are real, most of the characters are fictional." Therefore, she realized that the limit between the historical and the literary discourses is blurred and that this is portrayed through the written documents, such as letters, journals, and family photos that contribute to making the story more real, even though it is a fictional story.

Kogawa combined the historical and the literary discourses so as to provide a critical view of the Second World War in the light of the present. She resorted to reliable

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<sup>9</sup>Joy Nakayama Kogawa was born in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, in 1935. She is a Japanese Canadian writer and poet. When she was a child, she was forced to move to an internment camp (Slocan) for the Japanese Canadian community with her family during the Second World War. One of her well-known novels is *Obasan* (1981) that is considered by many authors as a semi-autobiographical novel. Other remarkable works are: *Six Poems* (1978), *Naomi's Road* (1986) and *Itsuka* (1992), a sequel to *Obasan*. (2012)



documented data, her own personal experiences, fictional elements such as the narrator, the cyclical structure of the novel (events before and after the war connected with Naomi's life as a child- flashbacks), and non-real characters. All these narrative elements allow the writer to create a vivid and memorable story which focuses on the rewriting of history.

In this novel, the dichotomy between facts and events is exploited since the main character resorts to both of them in order to reconstruct her story. This duality involves the notion that the historian manipulated the historical documents and that, in so doing, history is constructed in an incomplete way because only some events become facts. To what extent, is truth told? What information remains as an event and what becomes a fact? Hutcheon established a distinction between facts and events, which is also used by historians. She suggested that "events (...) are configured into facts by being related to 'conceptual matrices within which they have to be imbedded if they are to count as facts.'" (122)

The facts provided by aunt Emily's diary and manuscripts and Naomi's experiences portray the harsh history that the Japanese Canadians suffered. At the same time, the government gave a different version of the events by calling the internment camps as "interior housing projects." (36) The official version has the objective of decreasing the damage caused to this community. However, Japanese people received an unfair treatment on the part of the government and they were not even treated as Canadian citizens and as members of the country where they were born and grew up. They were imprisoned and were sent to internment camps. The events narrated by Naomi are reinforced with the data provided by Emily Kato, Naomi's aunt, who states:

The American Japanese were interned as we were in Canada, and sent off to concentration camps, but their property wasn't liquidated as our was. And look how quickly the communities reestablished themselves in Los Angeles and San Francisco. 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. Official racism was blatant in Canada. The Americans have a Bill of Rights, right? We don't. (35)

Without forgetting her past, the protagonist rereads the newspaper clippings that her aunt had collected during the war. Naomi reinterprets the official facts and reminds her memories of living and working in Slocan and Alberta in a way that strongly highlights her

personal experiences in these places. She finds a newspaper clipping in her aunt's folder that was entitled "Facts about Evacuees in Alberta" and shows a smiling Japanese Canadian family with the title, "Grinning and Happy." (213) The facts provided by the newspapers presented Japanese Canadians as happy with the strict measures taken by the government. However, history can be recognized as a nightmare from the Japanese Canadian perspective since they were oppressed and subdued and they had to fight in order to survive in a place where they were treated as foreigners. In 1972, Naomi remembers the situation of the Japanese Canadians during the war when she claims that "men, women and children outside Vancouver, from the 'protected area'...were herded into the grounds and kept like animals until they were shipped off to roadwork camps and concentration camps in the interior of the province." (83)

In wartime years, the sense of belonging that the Japanese community developed was destroyed by the newspapers' propaganda that described them as spies and traitors. As a result, their status as Canadian citizens was completely denied. The official discourse constructed them as the enemies inside the country, so the government forced them to move into ghost towns in British Columbia and displaced them from the Canadian community. In a journal of letters to Naomi's mother, Aunt Emily expresses that "...the newspapers are printing outright lies. There was a picture of a young Nisei boy with a metal box and it said he was a spy with a radio transmitter. When the reporting was protested the error was admitted in a tiny line in the classified section at the back..." (91) This example illustrates the way in which the newspapers controlled by the power of the official discourse represented Japanese Canadians as the enemies inside the country.

Naomi and her young brother Stephen with their aunt Aya and Uncle Isamu Kato were sent to Slocan first and, later on, to Granton in Alberta, and they had to adapt to the new life there. Even when the war ended, they were not allowed to return to their home and, instead, they were relocated again and the families were scattered and some other Japanese people were deported to Japan. Japanese Canadians could not understand why they had received such treatment during the war since the Nisei and Sansei generations were born in Canada and, consequently, they were Canadian citizens. Naomi claims "Oh Canada whether it is admitted or not, we come from you we come from you...We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an

unlikely planting...” (248) She points out her sense of belonging to a country that constantly does not respect her rights as Canadian.

In *Obasan*, Kogawa deconstructs the homogeneous official version of the events and gives voice to the marginalized and silenced Japanese community. The entire notion of history is problematized under the eyes of Naomi, who wants to know the truth and resorts to different sources in order to reconstruct her story. Through Naomi’s consciousness, the writer seeks to assert the authority, reliability and legitimacy of the Japanese community’s historical perspective in a society where the official discourse constantly denied and ignored it. Her memories and past experiences allow her to go deep inside herself and beyond her family’s story.

Naomi is forced to remember some hazardous situations so as to understand what happened to the Japanese community and, especially, to her mother. She suffered the abandonment and the silence of her mother’s departure when she was young because her grandmother was ill and her mother had to travel to Japan to take care of her. The protagonist does not know how to grasp the reasons of her absence and why she did not return to see her and Stephen. She continuously asks to herself and to others: “what do you think happened to Mother and Grandma in Japan? Did they starve, do you think?” (204) These questions were not answered when she was a child since her mother and the whole family wanted to protect the children. Silence remains throughout the novel represented mainly by aunt Obasan who does not give Naomi an explanation about her mother’s disappearance. Naomi identifies Obasan with silence when she claims that “the language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful.” (14)

On the other hand, Aunt Emily seeks for the truth and is one of the active members of the family that tells Naomi and Stephen that their mother died after the bomb attack that took place in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1945. Their mother was badly injured and she could not recover from the horror she underwent. Naomi is told the truth and expresses:

Martyr mother, you pilot your powerful voicelessness over the ocean and across the mountain, straight as a missile to our hut on the edge of a sugar-beet field. You wish to protect us with lies, but the camouflage does not hide your cries. Beneath the hiding I am there with you. Silent Mother, lost in the abandoning, you do not share the horror. At first, stumbling and unaware of pain, you open

your eyes in the red mist and sheltering a dead child, you flee through the flames.  
Young mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there? (265)

The protagonist reconstructs her own version of the events that were significant in her childhood in order to make sense of what happened to her family during the war and of how this historical event marked her life. In this journey, the main character presents an unofficial version in opposition to the official story given by the Canadian government.

As regards the narrative strategies employed by the writer, the most relevant one is intertextuality. This strategy is used to establish a connection between the past and the present in order to rewrite the past events with a new consciousness and perspective. Kogawa wanted to portray the darkness of the human condition in a period of war in which the chaos and fears were superior to reason and communion within a nation. This story aims at legitimating the fight of the Japanese Canadians that were the victims of atrocious crimes committed by their mother country. In the story, Naomi realizes the importance of remembering when Aunt Emily claims that “you are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene...” (54)

The historical records, such as the articles of newspapers, telegrams, and letters with the official history of the war and the personal data collected by Aunt Emily in the form of a journal, letters, and manuscripts recount the past and allow the protagonist to reconstruct her personal story. This information which includes the voices from the past, is a link between who they were and who they are and gives the reader the opportunity to be immersed in a narrative structure with a sequence of events that changes from past to present and vice versa. The protagonist, Obasan and Aunt Emily are constantly struggling between the present and the past. Naomi refers to the importance of the past, especially memories, and claims: “all our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past.” (25) As the story moves on, Naomi believes that it is better to forget the “crimes of history” (44); however, Aunt Emily insists on the idea that “the past is the future” (45) and that they have to accomplish the aim they have been fighting for as Aunt Emily states in her manuscript “a struggle for liberty.” (40)

Most of the documents collected and found in Aunt Emily’s scrapbook with clippings are evidence of the injustices and the persecution that Japanese Canadians suffered. The story depicts the events with dates, places, the name of authorities, the

measures taken, images in the case of newspapers, and other facts that contribute to making a subjective reconstruction of the historical event. All these historical records interweave with the memories and thoughts that the main character reminds from the past and she tries to ensure that truth emerges after all. In searching the truth, Naomi goes deep inside her own self and attempts to reconstruct her own story.

Other texts like poems and songs constitute the intertextual meanings that allow the writer to express the characters' feelings and emotions. At the beginning of the story, a poem related to silence predicts the contrast between silence and speech that is emphasized in the novel. Naomi clearly believes that "how different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior. She's a crusader, a little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes." (33) Besides, songs are employed to communicate the emotional side of the main character and to know how the Canadian culture was assimilated by the Japanese community. They accept their nationality as Canadians who love their country and want to be regarded as part of it. Naomi sings at school: "O Canada, our home and native land True patriot love in all thy sons command With glowing hearts we see thee rise..." (170)

In *Obasan*, there are many intertextual references to fairy tales that allude to the protagonist's experiences. The stories used are: *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, *Goldilocks*, *Humpty Dumpty*, "Chicken Little", *Momotaro* and *Ninomiya Kinjiro* among others. In my analysis, I will focus only on the most relevant tales that are significant for the protagonist's reconstruction of her personal story.

One of the stories mentioned is called *Momotaro*, of Japanese origin, which is about a boy who comes from a peach tree and is raised by his adopted parents until he goes. Naomi remembers this tale from her childhood since this story was told by her mother at bedtime. The story of *Momotaro* is like a shelter to Naomi where she felt protected, out of danger, because her mother was with her and she had everything she needed as a child. The main character reinterprets this past experience that makes her feel safe, at home, in Vancouver, in contrast to the pain, suffering and injustices of the war. The tale reveals the multicultural relations in Canada since it can be recognized as part of Naomi's Japanese cultural heritage and, at the same time, it also belongs to the Canadian culture as Aunt Emily points out: "Momotaro is a Canadian story. We're Canadian, aren't

we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian.” (61) At this stage, Aunt Emily continuously acknowledges the fact that they are Canadians and tries to encourage Naomi to fight for the recognition of their rights as citizens. In this way, the protagonist can reconstruct her own identity and personal story by identifying herself with the culture in which some family members and herself grew up.

Another fairy tale that is relevant for this analysis of intertextuality is *Goldilocks*. In the process of going back to the past in order to revisit it with a critical perspective, the protagonist makes reference to the story of Goldilocks who is lost in the forest and finds the house of three bears; she is the intruder in the bears’ house. Naomi makes a comparison between the baby bear, Goldilocks and herself. She sometimes feels part of the nation and, at other times, she is an outsider of it. She argues that “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 beds Goldilocks sleeps in. Or perhaps, this is not true and I am really Goldilocks after all.” (136) The Japanese Canadians were the outcast of a country that did not make an attempt in order to defend them from the restrictions imposed by Great Britain.

Another fairy tale that makes reference to Naomi’s identity construction is the story of “Chicken Little” included in the book *Little Tales for Little Folk*. Chicken Little can be characterized as fragile, fearful and simple, so Naomi particularly identifies herself with him. In this case, there is one thing that baby chickens and Japanese people have in common that is the colour of the skin. While Naomi accepts that the Japanese community has an ethnic identity with its own language, history, religion and way of life since she has inherited the Japanese customs, traditions and manners, the yellow chicken symbolizes the incomprehension and the social prejudices that people have against them in society. The Japanese Canadians were considered as “lower order of people” (94) since their own neighbours saw them as a threat in the confusion that prevailed in this wartime period. She maintains that “to be yellow in the Yellow Peril game is to be weak and small. Yellow is to be chicken. I am not yellow. I will not cry however much this nurse yanks my hair.” (165) The quotation is permeated with the power and prejudices that people felt towards the Japanese Canadians who suffered the oppression.

All these intertextual references and connections let the reader associate the embedded stories with the feelings and thoughts that the protagonist narrates in order to

figure out the situations that her family members were obliged to face. Intertextuality as a narrative strategy plays a key role in the rewriting of the past with the critical perspective.

In relation to the narrative strategies used, the mode of narration is relevant in the novel. Naomi is an over controlling narrator, though other voices are present. The female character is both the protagonist and the narrator. Naomi situates the story in Granton where she moved with her family in 1951 and narrates events that occurred in the past (wartime) and in the present (1970's). The protagonist is a single school teacher who works in Cecil and tries to forget most of the memories about her traumatic experiences during childhood: the abuse of her neighbour, the death of her father, the loss of her mother, the tough life in the internment camps and the lack of defense from the Canadian government over the treatment they received. However, she wants to rewrite her own story by going back to the past.

The narrative voice does not provide an objective view on the events since her family was directly affected by the restrictions and resolutions taken by the official authorities. They were forced to move to Slocan when she was only five years old and, some years later, they were relocated in Granton, Alberta. There, they worked on sugar-beet farms. Naomi grew up with the companion of Stephen, her brother, Obasan and Uncle Isamu. While her mother was in Japan at the time the war broke out, her grandfather Kato and Aunt Emily were allowed to move to Toronto since they were given a special permission. The next time the protagonist meets Aunt Emily was twelve years after they moved to Slocan. From the moment that Aunt Emily comes to see Naomi and Obasan, things started to change since her return means that the truth will start to emerge. The protagonist clearly demonstrates that family ties are significant in the story since their relationship is quite strong and close and depicts the union and protection that exist between them.

The narrator struggles to find the truth. She is often caught in a dilemma because she wants to know the reasons of her mother's disappearance but, at other times, she thinks that the things of the past should be kept in the past. At the beginning, Naomi finds it impossible to speak and silence does not allow Naomi's voice to express what she needs. That is to say, she could not speak with her own voice since silence is like a stone. She could not verbalize her feelings as a result of the horror she had to face during childhood. Aunt Emily remembers that Naomi as a child almost neither speak nor laugh. Naomi

asserts that “speech hides within me, watchful and afraid.” (62) As Naomi searches for the truth due to her mother’s absence, she starts to evoke her feelings and waits for the answers of many questions. She wonders: “I hardly dare to think, let alone ask, why she has to leave. Questions are meaningless. What matter to my five-year-old mind is not the reason that she is required to leave, but the stillness of waiting for her to return.” (71)

As time goes by, Naomi realizes the importance of speech but, at the same time, silence prevails in the inability to tell what really happened to her. The narrative voice gives an account of the past traumatic experiences that make the reader aware of the fragmentation of Naomi’s identity. The main character seems to be stuck in time but then, she identifies herself with the speech and the expression of emotions through her aunt. Aunt Emily provided evidence of the facts that she had collected in relation to the Canadian fight and, this helps Naomi reinterpret her story. The female character rereads the documents and letters to comprehend the events and the situations that took place during the war and that deeply affected the lives of the Japanese Canadians. She continuously goes back to the past and tries not to recall the pain and the harassment that she was obliged to tolerate. In chapter twenty nine, Naomi points out that “...I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep.” (214)

The narrator recounts all the events that were relevant to understand the Japanese Canadian situation during the war from her personal and subjective perspective. The rewriting of Naomi’s story can be considered as a counter-discourse in relation to the official version given by the authorities in this country. This new version provides the reader with a critical inside towards the events that were significant for a community that was marginalized and submitted to brutal and serious war crimes.



## II. *Slaughterhouse-Five*

In this postmodern work, like Kogawa, Vonnegut<sup>10</sup> created a fictionalized story based on a historical event that happened during the Second World War: the firebombing of Dresden, a city in eastern Germany. This story is told from the point of view of an American soldier who is a survivor of war and was in Dresden when it was attacked. The protagonist travels in time from the past to the present and vice versa and tells the reader about his personal experiences in the war. The novel can be recognized as an autobiographical work<sup>11</sup> since the writer himself underwent the traumatic experiences as a prisoner of war in Germany.

The writer portrays the life of a soldier who is sent to Europe when the Second World War started. Vonnegut resorts to the literary and the historical discourses in order to depict the hard and serious trauma that the main character had as a result of being a witness of the injustices and the fury of the war in Dresden. The combination of these two discourses can be identified because the author includes some of his own personal experiences and historical facts in relation to the war but, at the same time, he incorporates a fictional character, Billy, as the protagonist to give an inside of the war from a different perspective.

The bombing of Dresden is an event that actually took place in the last stage of the war in 1945. The allies, British and American troops, decided to drop bombs on this German city and more than two hundred civilians died. The fact about Dresden constitutes the climax of the story. The protagonist was present in the bombing attack since he was with other Americans in the meat locker waiting for the operation. The story focuses on this event and mentions some facts related to the significant moments that America was facing when the writer wrote the story, such as the death of Robert Kennedy and Martin

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<sup>10</sup> Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was born on November 11 in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1922. When the Second World War broke out, Vonnegut entered the army and was sent to Europe, where he was almost immediately captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge. He was sent as a POW to Dresden, where British and American bombers destroyed the city by dropping explosives followed by incendiary bombs in 1945. One of the most influential works is the novel *Slaughterhouse-five* (1969). Other works are *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) and *Timequake* (1997). (Allen 2013)

<sup>11</sup> Many writers have analyzed this novel as autobiographical. (William 1988, Bloom 2009, Simmons 2010, among others)

Luther King Jr. in chapter 10 and the context of the Vietnam War. The blending of these discourses gives the audience an account of the combination that the writer wants to achieve in order to create this fictional story with some reliable data.

As regards the literary discourse, the inclusion of a fictional character, Billy Pilgrim, allows the reader to realize that the story is a fictional one. The writer constructs an imaginary character with a life and experiences similar to the ones he had. Some common facts connected with them are that both joined the American Army and that they were involved in the Second World War. They had witnessed the bombing in Dresden and suffered the trauma of the war. In relation to the feelings towards this shocking situation, the narrator claims that “one of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being a character.” (164) The event affected all the people who participated in a dramatic form causing many health and mental diseases.

In this novel, Billy Pilgrim has developed the ability to travel to different moments of his life without knowing which moment he would go the next time. His travels give the reader the opportunity to learn and understand the most significant moments of the protagonist's life. He had attended the Ilium School of Optometry before being enlisted for the military service. He was in Europe after the war broke out. He was involved in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium and then, he was captured with other American men by the Germans and was kept in concentration camps as a war prisoner. He saw the horror of the war, especially the bomb attack in Dresden. When the war was over in 1945, he became engaged to the daughter of the owner of the school of Optometry and he suffered a “mild nervous collapse.” (24) Then, he married his fiancée and had two children, Barbara and Robert. Billy had an airplane crash in 1968 and his wife died in an accident. Barbara, who is only twenty one years old and recently married, takes care of him responsibly and thinks he is insane, so he was taken to a mental hospital. He tells her about the existence of some creatures that captured him and brought him to the Tralfamadore planet. He even sends a letter to a radio station in which he describes the lessons and experiences he learnt from these earthling creatures. His daughter thinks that he has suffered a serious mental breakdown, so she decides to send him to a mental hospital. The impact that the war has on Billy's life is portrayed in all the chapters with the narrator's opinions, thoughts and descriptions.

In relation to the literary discourse, the writer also employs some fictional elements that belong to the science fiction genre, such as time travelling and the aliens that the protagonist refers to. In the first place, the protagonist goes back to the past with flashbacks that help the reader enter the character's memories and thoughts. There is a discontinuation in time since the character moves from one time in his life to another time. The narrator defines Billy "as a time-traveler, he has seen his own death many times, has described it to a tape recorder." (141) The events are not told in a chronological order, which contributes to creating instability and confusion in the narrative structure throughout the story. As a result of the decline of Billy's mind, his daughter believes that he is senile due to the airplane crash, so he receives a medical treatment. He leaps in time and according to the narrator, "he came stuck in time." (43) There are many instances in which the protagonist starts to travel in time and space. One example of time travelling is when he remembered the day in which he was going to learn how to swim with his father. He was really afraid of that. From there, he travelled in time to 1965 that was when he visited his mother in an old people's house. Then, he found himself in 1958; he was at a banquet of his son, Robert, who was a member of the league team. Going backwards and forwards contributes to making the reader aware of the inconsistency of the protagonist's mind and of the lack of reliability of most of the events the narrator describes.

Another element that the writer used is the presence of aliens that contributes to making the story fictional. Billy suggests that one day the Tralfamadorians kidnapped him in a flying saucer and brought him to their planet. This situation is connected with time, since according to one of the aliens, "all time is time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber." (86) There is not free will. Time cannot be changed and the events that happened to Billy cannot have possibly been altered. A link between what the Tralfamadorians did and the experiences Billy had in the war can be identified in the novel. The aliens captured him and asked him to take his clothes off in the same way as the Germans did it with him in the prison camps. He was forced to follow the instructions given by the Germans. Similarly, he was taken without his consent to this world that belonged to these creatures that did not speak because they communicated telepathically and that brought him to the zoo, where he was exhibited. Billy adopts the Tralfamadorian's philosophy of time and death in order to justify his own silence towards events that are part of his life like the bombing in Dresden. He does not want to prevent

some things from other people's lives; for example, he does not remind people about this bomb attack.

Billy refers to the concentration camp where he was a prisoner and this allows the reader to realize the importance of the title. The full title of the novel is actually *Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*. It was called "Schlachthoffünf," which means slaughterhouse five. He describes this place as "...built as a shelter for pigs to be butchered. Now it was going to serve as a home away from home for one hundred American prisoners of war." (152) They received an unfair and harsh treatment since they were prisoners of war in the hands of the enemy. He remembers the first day in this place with Edgar Derby, a school teacher, who was shot after the Dresden bombing for stealing a teapot. Moreover, there is reference to another part of the title that is directly connected with the Children's Crusade. The narrator argues that he will give this name to the book he is writing. The Children's Crusade was an event that took place in 1213 about the armies of children that were sent to North Africa as slaves. Then, some of them that could survive were fed and sheltered by some gentile people that decided to send them to their country. The narrator portrays the fact that the war is fought by children in the same way as Billy and his war friends were involved in this cruel event when they were young.

At this point, the reader cannot ignore the references that the narrator makes about the prison camps that are also relevant to the novel *Obasan*. The protagonists of the two stories are regarded as a threat for the national peace and are seen as invaders in a chaotic and calamitous setting. In *Obasan*, Naomi is a Canadian citizen and receives an unfair treatment on the part of her own nation. She was not directly involved in the war but the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour influenced the change of attitude in relation to people of Japanese descent in Canada. She has to overcome the difficult situation she has faced during these dark years. The loss of her family members influences her journey towards the past in order to dignify the fight for her community. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy is a foreign soldier, actually a chaplain's assistant that was sent to fight for his country in Germany. He did not even have a gun, so he was vulnerable. He travels in time and space since he is stuck in time. Like Naomi, Billy is caught by the war memories that surround them. These novels depict the injustices and the hard life that the enemies wanted to give to the prisoners of war.

The concept of deconstruction is also applied to *Slaughterhouse-five*. The male character tries to live in a world full of contradictions between his real life and the unreal life. The war had a destructive influence on Billy's mind. The reader can infer that he suffered from a post traumatic stress and that he was also badly injured after the airplane crash. This dichotomy makes him be unaware of the fact that he lives in a dual world. Billy is a successful, rich, happy and well-known optometrist but, at the same time, he seems to be weak, inconsistent and vulnerable, especially as a prisoner of war, in the Tralfamadore planet and in the mental veterans' hospital. When he was at the hospital, he was under the effects of morphine, which lead to increasing the incongruity of the events that happened in his life. The narrator refers to the impact that this substance has on Billy: "Under morphine, Billy had a dream of giraffes in a garden (...) Billy was a giraffe, too. He ate a pear. It was a hard one." (99) The narrator allows the reader to know the mental processes, the ideas and the emotional side of the protagonist's mind. There is an attempt to construct the complex identity of Billy, who has been dealing with the trauma and the tragedy of that event. It can be said that war experiences and his mental disorder forced him to reconstruct the concept of time. It is not sometimes easy to identify the time frame where Billy is: present, past or future time.

Even though he is not aware of the fact that some things are real and some other situations are part of his imagination, the protagonist attempts to reconstruct the most relevant moments in his life. There is not a clear-cut boundary between reality and fiction, so Billy does not know what event is actually happening. He usually wakes up after being slept or goes from one place, such as his work or the prison to another place like the Tralfamadore planet. The damage to Billy's brain allows the reader to travel from different phases of his life in short periods of time.

Intertextuality is a literary strategy that Vonnegut uses to put emphasis on the meanings he wants to convey. History is problematized through the referential connections established. There are some references to historical books that provide the background of the bombing of Dresden in the novel. One book the narrator mentions is *Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery* by Mary Endell. The narrator, who can also be recognized as a character, was with his veteran friend O'Hare and his wife Mary. They tried to remember the war. In this context, the narrator reads the book about the splendid period that Dresden had in 1760. In contrast, he wants to make people aware of the events that happened in this

city that was bombarded during the Second World War. The narrator constantly goes backwards to the war with intertextual connections. He refers to a movie about American bombers during the war and includes characters such as Hitler and Adam and Eve. (75) Another book that has already been mentioned is the “Children’s Crusade.” Billy and his partner, Derby, became aware that the war was fought by babies and the narrator highlights: “‘My God, my God-’ I said to myself, ‘it’s the Children’s Crusade.’” (106)

The American perspective towards the war, especially what happened in Dresden, is presented through a copy of the President Harry Truman’s announcement. In the document, it was stated the following:

The advocates of nuclear disarmament seem to believe that, if they could achieve their aim, war would become tolerable and decent. They would do well to read this book and ponder the fate of Dresden, where 135,000 people died as the result of an air attack with conventional weapons. On the night of March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945, an air attack on Tokyo by American heavy bombers, using incendiary and high explosive bombs, caused the death of 83,793 people. The atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed 71,379 people. (188)

The destructive nature of war is depicted in this quote due to the number of deaths caused, though some people in favour of it see the war as something tolerable and justifiable. In another fragment of Truman’s copy, it was asserted that “an atomic bomb...The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.” (185) There is no negotiation between the groups involved since war usually comes from anger and from a variety of interests. The government exerted its power over the ones that started the war as a form of punishment and the authorities thought that they took the correct decision in order to put an end to the horror spread.

Through the narrator’s eyes, it can be inferred that his friend and himself could not remember anything good about war. It was a massacre and the narrator did not want that his sons were involved in this event. In one book called *Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two* that belongs to Rumfoord, a history professor and an American historian, who was with Billy at the hospital after he had the airplane crash, it was claimed that “...there was almost nothing in the twenty-seven volumes about the Dresden raid...The extent of the success has been kept a secret for many years after the war - a secret from the

American people. It was no secret from the Germans, of course, or from the Russians...” (191) However, Rumfoord accepted the fact that Americans heard about Dresden and that it was even worse than the bomb dropped in Hiroshima. This version was finally known by Americans who could have access to an event in which their government’s action was essential to understand the consequences of the war in Europe. This novel can be considered as a counter-discourse since it provides the inside of the fire-bombing in Dresden from the American point of view.

One reference to the aliens that play a key role in Billy’s life is the book *The Big Board* by Kilgore Trout. This novel was available in the bookstore where Billy entered. After reading a couple of paragraphs, he realized that he had already read it in the veteran’s hospital. The narrator maintains that the story “was about an earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra-terrestrials. They were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon 212.” (201) According to Billy, he was captured by these creatures and then, they decided to transport him to their planet, where he was forced to do what they wanted. He learnt some lessons from them; for example, that the Tralfamadorians thought that dead people were in a bad condition at that specific moment, but then, they were fine in a lot of moments. Both the narrator and Billy use the expression “so it goes” after death in order to dignify the lives of those who had died: his father, his mother, his wife, his best war friend, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus and the people killed in the bombing of Dresden. Besides, he became aware of the existence of five sexes on Tralfamadore and all of them were essential in the creation of a new life. Billy thought that their planet was full of peace and wanted to know how Tralfamadorians did it. Nevertheless, the aliens accepted that they had had wars as horrible as the one Billy witnessed. Tralfamadorians tried to enjoy the good moments and ignored the bad moments instead of preventing the war. They thought that humans should do the same. This book has an impact on Billy’s life since his idea related to these creatures can be considered as part of his imagination.

The mode of narration is another narrative strategy that Vonnegut employed. The narrator is an overtly controlling narrator like Naomi in *Obasan*. He presents the events using the first person in the first chapter and then, switches into the third person. The narrator becomes a fictional minor character that tells the reader about his involvement in the Second World War and he acknowledges the fact that he was a prisoner of war. He has a war friend named Bernard V. O’Hare. The narrator and O’Hare were locked in a room

called "Slaughterhouse." (1) He invited O'Hare to go on a trip to Dresden and to see how the city looks like today. It can be said that the narrator is Vonnegut himself due to the similarities between Vonnegut and the narrative voice: they were prisoners of war; they witnessed the bombing in Dresden; and they lost war friends. The narrator is writing a book in which he describes the events that took place in the POW centre in Dresden. He finds it difficult to deal with his thoughts about the war, and he states that "I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen." (2) He is unable to remember anything good in relation to what he lived in Germany. War is a massacre in which all people are supposed to be dead except birds. He warns his sons not to have a job in a company where people "make massacre machinery." (19) He narrates about the bombing of Dresden that is the main story in the anti-war<sup>12</sup> book he has been writing. The protagonist is Billy Pilgrim, who was a prisoner of war and travels in time because of the post traumatic stress he has had. The narrator uses the third person to refer to Billy and to the main events in his life. Then, he gives the reader information about the book he wrote. He points out, "it begins like this: Listen: *Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time*. It ends like this: *Poo-tee-weet?*" This is a metafictional element since the narrator tells us about the process of writing in the novel. In another part of the novel, he argues: "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book." (125) The narrator inserts himself in the narrative making the reader conscious of the fictionalization of the story. He does not have the capacity of moving in time. Like Billy Pilgrim, he is "unstuck in time." (23) In his life, time cannot pass. Between the past and the future he questions himself about the present. He wonders "how deep it was." (18) The narrator is profoundly affected by the trauma of the war in the same way as the protagonist is. He tries to portray the dark human side of a cruel event that marked his life. He points out that "prisoners of war from many lands came together that morning at such and such a place in Dresden. It had been decreed that here was where the digging for bodies was to begin. So the digging began." (213) The narrative voice is not reliable since he was influenced by the experiences he underwent during the war and he provides a subjective view over the events. He makes reference to the fact that the war was not present in many American historical books as part of the country's history. Through

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<sup>12</sup> Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been analyzed as an anti-war novel because of the criticism the writer expresses against the war. ( Veas-Gulani 2003, Moody 2009, Vargas Cohen 2011 among others works)



Billy's testimony as a soldier in the war in Europe, especially in Dresden, the narrator tells about the American point of view towards the war crimes lots of soldiers suffered unfairly.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well as in *Obasan*, the narrators are not reliable since they report the events that happened in their lives subjectively. They are directly involved in the events they described and they try to depict the harsh reality of the Second World War. In these novels, the narrators realize the importance of telling the reader about the situations they faced with their family and friends. On the one hand, Billy has lost the mental capacity in the same way as many soldiers after they returned from being involved in a war. As a result, the narration is not so stable since he becomes a time-traveller. On the other hand, Naomi underwent some traumatic experiences and he went back to the past in order to narrate the injustices that the Japanese Canadian community suffered. The narrative structure in both cases is circular because it combines the different time frames and interweaves all the experiences, thoughts and dreams. The reader has to be conscious of the time where the event is happening since the narrators move from the past to the present and in the other way around. These postmodern novels narrate stories that focus on the war and the unforgettable impact of it in the protagonists' lives. They were witnesses of how tragedy embedded their soul with pain since they lost family members in the journey towards the truth. Billy and Naomi were sometimes confused and they tried to be recognized as victims of the war in their own way; in fact, they wanted to tell their own version of the events. They aim at reconstructing their stories with their personal voice to let people know what really happened in the Second World War. They use their voice as an instrument that allows them to communicate the horror of the war and to relieve the pain of being a witness of this event. The protagonists deconstruct this event in order to rewrite their own stories in the light of the present. They try to put all the pieces of the puzzle in the correct way so as to know and comprehend the experiences they have had. In this journey, they present their stories as counter-discourses towards the official version of the events from the Canadian and American perspective respectively.

## Conclusions

The concept of history has frequently been studied and explored from different approaches. In the postmodern era, many authors have written works with a new perspective because the belief that the truth is absolute and universal started to be questioned and problematized in the light of the present. The fall of the Grand Narratives influenced the stories created due to the lack of certainty and to the instability that have remained in the period since 1970's. Some significant historical events are portrayed differently. The stories are made and told following one point of view over the vision of those voices that are silenced and hidden. The ideological implications and interests that some powerful groups have are incorporated in the ideas explored in the novels and the way events are depicted. In the process of rewriting history, the writers combine the historical and the literary discourses with a self-reflexive historiography in a new and critical context and with a specific ideological perspective.

Many poststructuralist thinkers believe that texts pretend to hide some meanings that can be reinterpreted in order to deconstruct the history taken as granted. In so doing, the reader can realize that some meanings are not stable and aim at focusing on the gaps and fissures given by the protagonists, who usually have difficulty in understanding what is happening around them. They attempt to reconstruct stories that are told by marginalized people who do not have the opportunity to express their thoughts and experiences since they do not have a voice to speak. They remain under the darkness and silence they are obliged to tolerate. In general, the protagonists rewrite their stories with their own voice and make people become aware of how they survive in a world full of contradictions and questions. In this context, some writers resort to a number of narrative strategies to reconstruct the events and the chronology in which they took place. In these postmodern novels, intertextuality and the modes of narration are employed to create fragmented stories in which the characters try to find the truth by going back to their past differently.

In *Obasan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the main characters are conscious that the official version of history is not enough to answer all the questions and they decide to revisit the past in order to bring light into the darkness where they lived after they had been war prisoners. They rely on the historical data and records since their war experiences are filled with their subjective points of view. The protagonists have to deal with their own memories that usually confuse and overwhelm them. History is seen as a prison from

where they cannot escape in the same way as they were prisoners of war in the concentration camps. In order to comprehend what happened to them, they deconstruct the history to rewrite their own stories that are made up of war experiences, thoughts and documented information in relation to the Second World War.

In *Obasan*, Kogawa wrote a story about the life of a Canadian school teacher who does not have the ability to speak and communicate what happened to her when she was a child. She tries to avoid remembering the time when she lost her mother and suffered the trauma of the war. The protagonist attempts to find the answers and, as a result, the truth. Her Aunt Emily, who is an active advocate for the defense of the Canadian rights, helps Naomi understand the events she underwent. As the story moves on, she realizes the importance of speech and starts to reconstruct her personal story to comprehend the events that marked her life in a drastic way. The novel is a significant work that contributes to the Canadian history and represents the past with a critical view. It establishes a link between Naomi's story and the Japanese Canadians' stories that were portrayed differently by the government in the wartime period.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut gave voice to an American soldier who was a witness of the bombing of Dresden in Germany. He is badly damaged by the traumatic experiences. In his attempt to reconstruct his story, he travels in time back and forth. He is not aware of the place and of the time frame he is immersed in. The narrator deconstructs the history by resorting to his memories, different texts and thoughts that give him the opportunity to revisit with a new perspective the events he went through. Billy lost his war friend, Derby, and other family members that he tried to remember in the process of going backwards. Sometimes, he is overwhelmed by the changes in time that make the reader realize that he has a mental breakdown. The narrator wants to portray the hard reality the American soldiers had to face during the war when they were alone and far away from home.

The main characters in the novels have some common characteristics such as the journey towards the past (flashlights), the questioning of history under the eyes of the protagonists, the use of some intertextual references, the overtly controlling narrator and the thoughts and feelings of the characters. The deconstruction of history leads to the reconstruction of some historical events like the fire-bombing of Dresden during the war. These events put into question what is real and what is fictional and make the reader

discriminate between the official version given by the American and Canadian governments and the unofficial version made up of war experiences and documented information of the protagonists. These stories can be recognized as a critique against the destructive nature of war and against the attitude adopted by the government.

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