

Identity Politics in Atwood, Kogawa, and Wolf

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**Jean Wilson,**

**"Identity Politics in Atwood, Kogawa, and Wolf"**

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**Abstract:** Jean Wilson's article, "Identity Politics in Atwood, Kogawa, and Wolf," is a comparative study of three texts published in the early 1980s: Atwood's "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother," Kogawa's *Obasan*, and Wolf's *Cassandra*. Identity politics figure prominently in all three literary works, whose common poetic project is one of demythologization and of enabling at the same time the emergence of a new, liberating articulation, a language perhaps "never heard before." These writings interrogate the construction of identities in a patriarchal culture and contribute to a more complex understanding of identity formation. All three works, albeit in different ways, challenge readers to consider identity interrogatively and to explore in new voices what it means to say "we," to say "they," to say "you," to say "I."

**Jean WILSON**

### **Identity Politics in Atwood, Kogawa, and Wolf**

Christa Wolf has said that questions "constitute the internal 'plot' of [her] book on Cassandra" (*Fourth Dimension* 109). These questions concern the possible overcoming of the alienation inflicted by the exclusionary and objectifying practices of a patriarchal culture. Since they clearly give rise to "further questions" (*Cassandra* 305), one is unsurprised by the interrogative nature of the four essays accompanying *Cassandra*, originally presented as Wolf's "Lectures on Poetics" at the University of Frankfurt in 1982. *Cassandra* (1983), which reworks traditional literary accounts of the Trojan War, constitutes an act of feminist "re-vision," in Adrienne Rich's sense of the term: "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35). Helping to ensure that this process of "re-vision" not be isolated as a purely aesthetic matter, the wide-ranging questions posed in the accompanying lectures address issues of cultural identity and social responsibility as well as problems in poetics: "Who was Cassandra before anyone wrote about her?" (273); "How do you suppose the people of Troy behaved during the siege?" (255); "Why has so little notice been taken of the fact that in social terms Cassandra belongs to the ruling class, the daughter of the king?" (175); "And how did her mother, Hecuba, so superabundantly blessed with sons, treat her few daughters?" (153); "What other way is there for an author to handle the custom ... of remembering history as the story of heroes?" (262); "As for us, what do we believe in?" (207); "Radical thinking is being required of us now, but of what kind?" (252); "To what extent is there really such a thing as 'women's writing'?" (259); "As for turning things into objects: Isn't that the principal source of violence?" (259); "Why didn't you speak up at the time?" (256); "Do we have a chance?" (229). Although many additional questions could be cited, I want to stop with this urgent one -- "Do we have a chance?" -- for it raises the problem of who "we" is. Indeed, any meaningful answer would require first of all an asking, a rethinking, of what it means to say "we," to say "you," to say "they," to say "I." These are precisely the questions that constitute, in part, "the internal plot" not only of Wolf's *Cassandra*, but also of two Canadian works, likewise published in the early 1980s, which I have also selected for discussion here: Margaret Atwood's short story "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother" (1983) and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981). Identity politics figure prominently in all three literary works, whose common poetic project is one of demythologization and of enabling the emergence of a new, liberating articulation: Kogawa's "freeing word" (ii), Atwood's "language ... never heard before" (18), and Wolf's "subversive," "living word," which, instead of "produc[ing] stories of heroes, or of antiheroes, either," seeks "to name the inconspicuous, the precious everyday, the concrete" and thus "reveal hitherto unrecognized possibilities" (270-71).

The first half of Atwood's story -- another work of "re-vision" -- consists mainly of the narrator's retelling of stories by and about her mother with which she has grown up; she attempts now to analyze these narratives of identity, to expose her mother's blind spots and hidden agendas, to deconstruct what has become a powerful mythology. Recalling, for instance, the story of the baby chicks the mother had picked up and thus "loved ... to death," the daughter speculates on its significance: "Possibly this story is meant by my mother to illustrate her own stupidity, and also her sentimentality. ... Possibly it's a commentary on the nature of love; though, knowing my mother, this is unlikely" (1). The narrator, of course, both does and does not "know [her] mother," just as the mother has only a limited understanding of her daughter, as the second half of Atwood's story reveals. Here the narrator takes a critical look at stories that were repeatedly told about her, correcting her mother's version of events -- "The real truth is that I was sneakier than my brother" (14) -- and showing the presumptuousness of maternal familiarity. Thinking of the often-read story about a poor girl whose last bit of food -- a potato -- gets up and runs away, the narrator realizes that her mother "is probably still under the impression that I identified with the little girl, with her hunger and her sense of loss; whereas in reality I identified with the potato" (17). As a child, the narrator refrains from challenging her mother's stories, and only years later does she recognize that what her mother thought "was merely cute may have been lethal" (15). Now she fights back, as it were, exposing the mythologies that had served to define the identity of mother and daughter in ways apparently acceptable only to the former.

In particular, the mother's construction of herself and her female child as a conspiratorial "we" in opposition to the male sphere makes use of discursive strategies which the narrator seems powerless to resist until much later, when, as an adult, she critically and creatively appropriates her mother's stories in her own narrative of identity. Two tales of haircutting, both originally the mother's stories, are juxtaposed in the daughter's narrative. The first tells of how the mother at age sixteen outwits her domineering father and manages to have her hair cut just the way she wants it: "'I went out straight away [and] had it all chopped off,' says my mother jauntily" (4). The second tale (an account of the preteen narrator's long curls being shorn) resembles the first in that the child is happy to have her hair cut, and does so while the parent normally in control is temporarily incapacitated (the father in the first case is in the dentist's chair; the mother in the second case is in hospital), but here the daughter shows no defiance or even initiative and is cast as a passive observer of her own outward maturation: "So it was that my hair was sheared off. I sat in the chair in my first beauty parlour and watched it falling, like handfuls of cobwebs, down over my shoulders" (5). In the mythology constructed by the mother, the daughter follows in the latter's footsteps, but what was for the mother a defining act of independence becomes for the daughter a mere rite of passage, easily appropriated by the mother's narrative energies and made to reinforce the construction of the daughter as a pleasantly compliant individual -- "You were such an easy child" (13) -- or even slightly pathetic victim: "You were just putty in his hands" (14). The hands in this case belong to the narrator's brother, mythologized as "a hell-raiser" (14) and part of the "men's world" (10) from which the daughter is excluded. The deconstructive retelling of the haircutting stories reveals how they subtly conscripted their original audience, the narrator, into a female alliance: "'Your father was upset about it [the daughter's haircut],' says my mother with an air of collusion. She doesn't say this when my father is present. *We smile, over the odd reactions of men to hair*" (5, emphasis added).

While much is made of the mother's controlling narrative voice, a dominance the narrator partially escapes during her sullen university days, a time about which the mother "has few stories to tell" (18), the idea of an autonomous narrating subject is undermined, as is the mother's belief "that what you save from the past is mostly a matter of choice" (16). Atwood's text provides ample evidence of the social narratives that impose a shape on personal stories, as, for example, in the observation, "'In those days things like that ... were not mentioned.' She means in mixed company" (9). The mother's father, a country doctor, as a person of rank enjoyed the accumulation of many stories about himself, stories that in turn contributed to the identity of his audience as an admiring, socially inferior, "we": "We all respected him" (2), was the mother's assured refrain. This, apparently, in contrast to the mother's mother, who figures in only a single story repeated here, that of how she would insist that her children eat everything on their plate before they left the table. The mother's world, indeed, was a hierarchically structured world, with the father "at the top" and a "secret life -- the life of pie crusts, clean sheets, the box of rags in the linen closet, the loaves in the oven -- [that] was female" (3). Years later, when her daughter is grown up and the mother casually mentions her intention of being an archaeologist in her "next incarnation" (16), the narrator finds it shocking that her mother "might have wanted to be something other than what she was" and "might not have been totally contented fulfilling the role in which fate had cast her: that of being my mother" (17). In showing personal and social narratives to be mutually reinforcing, Atwood's story reveals the individual's relative lack of control in identity formation, undercutting any superficial notions about the mother's mastery or even satisfaction in this regard. At the same time, however, the narrative suggests the extent to which the mother, while subject to the defining discourses of the larger social order, succeeds in shaping her own identity and becoming something other, in fact, than what "fate" had determined she should be. In the linked stories "of sustained hilarity and hair-raising adventure" (5), the reader glimpses the mother's construction of an identity and a life that, while hardly revolutionary, nevertheless allow her to break new ground in negotiating between that patriarchal realm "at the top" and the world of pie crusts, clean sheets, and boxes of rags. This is not to say that the mother's stories do not perpetuate gender divisions and social hierarchies. Even though she, for instance, "sen[ds] herself to university" in defiance of conventional expectations, her tales about this time illustrate that it is "desirable in boys [as opposed to girls] to be great jokers, to be always up to something" (7). There are stories she tells "to women only, usually in the kitchen" (11), and there are anecdotes that contribute to the sexist socialization of her children. Through the juxtaposition of her

mother's stories and her own memories, however, the narrator is able to discern some of these structural biases and subtexts, and she begins to replace her mother's "we's," "you's," and "they's" with pronouns that fit her own experience. Thus, for instance, the mother's story of "the time we almost died" -- the "we" here referring to the family -- is supplemented by the narrator's particular perspective, in which "we" refers only to her brother and her: "we [in the back seat of the car] were imitating bagpipe music by holding our noses and humming" (12-13). At the end of the reflection, both usages of "we" give way to a narrative "I" that asserts the validity of the daughter's perspective, but also, significantly, acknowledges the partiality of this view: "I didn't know until afterwards what had really happened. I was in the back seat, making bagpipe music, oblivious. The scenery was the same as it always was on car trips: my parents' heads, seen from behind, sticking up above the front seat. My father had his hat on, the one he wore to keep things from falling off the trees into his hair. My mother's hand was placed lightly on the back of his neck" (13). The narrative ends with the daughter's debunking of "my mother's mythology that I am as cheerful and productive as she is" and the recognition that "there must have been something going on in me that was beyond her: at any time I might open my mouth and out would come a language she had never heard before" (18). But even as the narrative "I" discovers different alliances and distances itself from the mother's overly familiar "we," it remains rooted in that "we," indebted to that voice; the daughter's narrative, while a new one, "never heard before," does not constitute a radical departure from the mother's discourse, but is made of and against it. Critical of her mother's mythology but also drawing from it, the narrator names as significant in identity formation what Christa Wolf, as mentioned above, calls "the inconspicuous, the precious everyday, the concrete" (*Cassandra* 270). Accordingly, readers of Atwood's text are challenged to respond in a language that they also, perhaps, have "never heard before": a significantly personal, even anecdotal, critical discourse. Indeed, in my experience in the classroom, discussion of Atwood's "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother" has invariably included an exchange of stories, a relating of significant moments in the lives of the class participants. Thus, the deceptively simple narrative contributes to a potentially more complex understanding and articulation of the various identities of its readers: identities it successfully contests.

Although Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* is also structured around questions of identity and the search for "speech that frees" (Kogawa ii), the narrator -- Naomi -- in this case faces not a well-articulated mythology, but rather a variety of overpowering silences. While working as a school teacher, intrusive questions from her pupils and their parents regarding her age, appearance, race, marital status, and nationality remind her of the "many questions [she does not] have answers for" (7), questions to which she has not been "given" answers, either as a child (26) or as an adult (45). The greatest silence is that of her mother, killed by the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, news of which, in accordance with the mother's wishes, does not reach Naomi: "Obasan and Uncle ... give me no words from you. They hand me old photographs" (242). Naomi's reflections on the constituents of her identity and on the ways in which that identity was shaped during her childhood meet with a whole series of dichotomies: silence versus speech; Aunt Emily, the "word warrior" (32), versus Obasan, from whose "dry lips" there is no sound (14); Obasan's "forgetfulness" (30) versus Aunt Emily's command to "remember everything" (50); Canadian versus Japanese; children versus adults; "we" versus "they" (70). This is the order of things spelled out on the -- for some people -- once compulsory identity cards, but Naomi's own experience complicates such apparent stabilities: Obasan's silence, for instance, is itself a "language" (32), a powerful one (14); Naomi's mother was born in Canada but raised in Japan; multicultural realities demonstrate that neither race nor ethnicity is synonymous with citizenship; as a supposedly protected child, Naomi suffers "the horror" of Old Man Gower (64), while her great-grandmother receives the mother's care (67); her brother tells her "[she's] a Jap," her father says "We're Canadian," and she is left with the riddle of being "both the enemy and not the enemy" (70).

According to Wolf's *Cassandra*, war "gives its people their shape" (13). Here, despite Aunt Emily's insistent proclamations, "*I am Canadian*" (39) and "We are the country" (42), the "we" in her wartime journal (80-110) refers not to this wider constituency, but specifically to Japanese Canadians -- a usage woven into Naomi's narrative of identity: "None of us, she [Aunt Emily] said, escaped the naming. We were defined and identified by the way we were seen" (118). Years after the war, Naomi begins to reformulate her identity, in part through the appropriation of materials collected by Aunt

Emily in a "heavy" package (31) -- a package of "heavy identity" (183) -- containing personal letters and a diary, newspaper clippings, conference papers, and official documents, all fragments of defining discourses to which she had been denied access. However, despite the fact that this information provides a means of overcoming the silences which have oppressed her, Naomi resists Emily's sanguine "gluing" back on of the tongue (36), above all because her experience is different: "Aunt Emily's Christmas 1941 is not the Christmas I remember" (79). Whereas Emily claims to "know the Nisei in every mood and circumstance" (39), her niece admits to no longer having any friends who are Japanese Canadians (38). Contemplating an old photograph of her mother and herself, Naomi recognizes her profound dislocation: "Only fragments relate me to them now, to this young woman, my mother, and me, her infant daughter" (53).

In order to "come at last to the freeing word" (ii), Naomi must relocate herself in the fragmented "we," "the despised rendered voiceless," "the silences that speak from stone," "the Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei, the Japanese Canadians" (111-12). However, she neither stops there nor simply ventures on, leaving the Japanese Canadian community behind, but rather redefines communal identity, as she rediscovers the different, often overlapping "we's" of which she has at various times in her life been a part. The narrative recalls, for instance, Naomi's experience of communion, not, to be sure, with overly familiar neighbours like the Barkers, who speak of "our Japanese" (225), but with seemingly remote ones such as Rough Lock Bill, who at one point frees the "quiet child" (56) from the silence and isolation in which she is drowning and induces her to print her name "in large letters in the sand" (144). Chapter 27 of *Obasan*, which opens with a conflation of images of communion and communication -- "In Aunt Emily's package, the papers are piled as neatly as the thin white wafers in Sensei's silver box" (182) -- tells of Nakayama-sensei's "desperation to keep the [Japanese-Canadian] community together" (186), but tells also of others, including many who are not Japanese Canadians, members too of a scattered minority, who feel an urgent need to come together: "Throughout the country, here and there, were a few people doing what they could. There were missionaries, sending telegrams, drafting petitions, meeting together in rooms to pray. There were a few politicians sitting up late into the night, weighing conscience against expedience. There were the young Nisei men and women, the idealists, the thinkers, the leaders, scattered across the country. In Toronto there were the Jews who opened their businesses to employ the Nisei. But for every one who sought to help, there were thousands who didn't. Cities in every province slammed their doors shut" (187). The chapter ends, as the novel itself does, with attention to the voice of the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians, a voice, like Nakayama-sensei's, of "desperation" (189). The people who rally together as part of this effort stand beside Sensei's people as a reconfigured community of resistance to the either/or ethos and identity politics of the dominant culture. Far from being "the ... story of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War," as the dust jacket proclaims (emphasis added), *Obasan*, certainly a powerful account of Japanese -- and other -- Canadians before, during, and after that defining historical moment, resists the use of narrative as a force of homogenization. The novel complicates essentializing discourses of identity, as Naomi moves from being placed, in echo of her literal wartime internment, by the inquisitions of an oppressive culture -- "He was so full of questions that I half expected him to ask for an identity card" (7) -- to a reclaiming of agency, an active positioning of herself beyond the answering assertions of "I am (not) this, I am (not) that." The last lines of the novel reflect a viable subject position, in and from which Naomi can come into her own: "Between the river and Uncle's spot are the wild roses and the tiny wildflowers that grow along the trickling stream. ... If I hold my head a certain way, I can smell them from where I am" (247). Unable for a long time to connect her own experience to "the heavy identity" implicated in Aunt Emily's "heap of words" (183), Naomi finally discovers in and through the language of dreams more radical links than have hitherto been apparent: "the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence" (228). She attends the "powerful voicelessness" of her mother (241), journeys into Obasan's "silent territory," removed from both "the multi-cultural piper's tune" and "the racist's slur" (226), and, ultimately, donning Aunt Emily's coat which is admittedly "warmer" than her own (246), makes her way in the "clamorous climate" that is Canada (226). Earlier in her reflections, Naomi wonders if "there [is] evidence for optimism" (199); indeed, amid the clamour of this "cold country" (226), is there room for the "living word" (ii)? One answer surely lies in reader response: in what silences, what voices,



readers of *Obasan* are able to hear, and in what kinds of questions Kogawa's readers are prompted to ask.

Wolf's *Cassandra*, like the other two works, traces the emergence of the narrator's own voice -- "To speak with my voice: the ultimate" (4) -- at the same time as it interrogates the conditions and the significance of this speaking. While the figure of the mother is once again important, in this case she is engaged in a development not unlike that of her daughter. In this "negative *Bildungsroman*" (Kuhn 208), Hecuba, the queen, initially enforcer of the "rules" that uphold the order of the palace (37), is gradually pushed away from the seat of power and then explicitly barred from taking part in the sessions of the council; thus silenced, she learns to raise her voice anew in the alternative community that inhabits the caves on the slopes of Mt. Ida, along the banks of the Scamander. The mother's voice is last heard as she is being dragged away after the fall of Troy, when she sounds her daughter's name, "a scream of triumph" (10). Unlike the narrators in the other two works, Cassandra finds her mother neither silent and remote -- her rules are very clear -- nor too familiar -- "Hecuba, my mother, knew me when I was young and ceased to concern herself with me" (12) -- but a lack of mutual understanding nonetheless clouds the mother-daughter relationship here as well. The problem is gradually resolved, as Cassandra, Priam's favourite, even before saying no to the council's plans and thus losing "everything [she] had called 'father'" (129), comes to meet her mother in the utopian space of Anchises' hut, where, as she says, "we began to live our life of freedom" (93). The "we" of mother and daughter is thus rooted in -- even conflated with -- a larger "we," that of the alternative cave community, which includes slaves and royalty, men and women, Amazons, Trojans, and Greeks. Despite its inclusiveness, however, this "we" does not come easily to Cassandra's tongue: "I used to say 'they' when I referred to the people in Anchises's circle, not 'we'; I was not yet allowed to say 'we.' Vacillating and fragile and amorphous was the 'we' I used, went on using as long as I possibly could. It included my father, but did it any longer include me? ... The 'we' that I clung to grew transparent, feeble, more and more unprepossessing, and consequently I was more and more out of touch with my 'I.' Yet other people knew perfectly well who I was, they had established my identity, to them it was clear: I was a prophetess and interpreter of dreams. An authority figure" (94). It is Marpessa, the slave, who "allows" Cassandra the experience of being "not mistress, not priestess" (12), and helps to expose Cassandra's illusions of knowledge and power by leading her to a place where the Trojan princess is forced to ask how many "realities" there are in Troy besides hers, which she "had thought was the only one" (20). In Wolf's version of the story, Cassandra's legendary prophetic gift, her power to foretell the future but not be believed, becomes simply the courage to see clearly, the present, the past, and hence the future (238); the seer cannot, however, be taken seriously by those whose interests forbid it. Vision, moreover, is not divorced from experience: "Did I really 'see'? What was it, then? I felt. Experienced -- yes, that's the word. For it was, it is, an experience when I 'see,' when I 'saw'" (59). As long as Cassandra clings to the narrow culture of the palace, her life of privilege, she "[sees] nothing" (27) and remains excluded from all the "we's" that might make her "I" viable. Elsewhere, Wolf writes about "the difficulty of saying 'I'" (*Quest* 170); in *Cassandra* -- in this particular work of "re-vision" -- there eventually arises, however, perhaps even more explicitly than in Wolf's other texts, "the possibility," as Myra Love puts it, "of saying 'we,' which can first make 'I' meaningful" (52-53; see also Komar 47-50).

Scarcely a truth-teller from the beginning, Cassandra acquires visionary power only after relinquishing her illusions of singularity, superiority, and autonomy. Her body the site of conflicting knowledges, Cassandra suffers two seizures before she is ready really to see, to experience other realities, as for instance, the violation of the Amazon leader Penthesilea: "Achilles the Greek hero desecrates the dead woman. ... She did not feel it. We felt it, all of us women" (120). Resisting the frenzy of the women that follows this outrage, however, Cassandra abruptly drops the empathic "we" and regards with horror the monstrous transformation of Penthesilea's companions, who are overcome by measureless suffering: "they were no longer recognizable" (121). Ultimately, Cassandra finds release not in madness, but in the solace of that "counterworld" (48), the defining, but not all-defining community in the caves, finding there, at last, her "we" (124), and out of that her own voice, in which the first utterance, significantly, is a question: "'What kinds of stones are those?' I said, astonished at how natural my voice sounded" (123). The ability finally to say an unconflicted "we" allows Cassandra the possibility both of saying a meaningful "I" and of reclaiming her Trojan identity (33). Unlike her

fellow seers Calchas (the Trojan who crosses over to the Greeks) and Panthous (the Greek who comes to the Trojans), Cassandra, supported by the "transnational culture" of the cave community (Eysel 174), resists an identity based on false alternatives: "Between killing and dying there is a third alternative: living" (118). This is not to suggest that Cassandra simply leaves a troubled culture to enter a brave new world of freedom; it is significant that she resolves to stay behind rather than journey with Aeneas to found a new civilization. Moreover, the community along the Scamander remains a utopian vision with a "limited existence" (Eysel 172); a provisional alliance, which demythologizes the universalizing "we" of the palace and gives rise to alternative, communal forms of selfhood (see Komar 57), it does not establish itself as the bearer of a new, stable, group identity. This is precisely why it is such an important model, particularly in view of the identity politics in which Aeneas, as we know from Virgil's *Aeneid*, will subsequently engage. Ultimately, Cassandra is left to negotiate between the "I" and that most challenging of all the "we's" she will ever say: "we" who are capable of inflicting unlimited pain on one another (119). This is the "we" addressed not only in Cassandra's question at one point in the narrative, "Did we have to behave this way?" (101), but also in the question with which I began, posed by Wolf in one of the accompanying lectures interrogating the conditions of life in a patriarchal culture: "Do we have a chance?" (229). This use of the pronoun also includes -- not, I think, in an overly familiar way, nor, as the text makes clear, with recourse to any presumptuous notion of universal "human nature" (79) -- the intended audience of the narrative, the implied readers to whom Cassandra offers "this tiny rivulet" alongside the well-known "river of heroic songs" (81). Whether or not this "we" has a chance remains an open question, but the novel *Cassandra*, whose author believes that today, all literature must be "peace research" (*Author's Dimension* 185), engages some of the questions that might be asked as a means of approaching this undeniably urgent one. Like the other two literary works I have discussed, albeit in different ways, *Cassandra* invites readers to consider identity interrogatively, to explore in new voices what it means, and what it might yet mean, to say "I," to say "we."

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