WHEN SILENCE ISN’T GOLDEN:
SELF-HATRED IN CANADIAN ETHNIC MINORITY WRITING

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Introduction

When reflecting on the vast history of the world, Canada is a relatively young country. It was over 12,000 years ago, towards the end of the ice age, that the ancestors of Canada’s native peoples began their migration from Siberia across the Bering Strait land bridge; however, not a great deal is known about what happened between this time and 1497, the year that European contact with Canada was reopened with significant consequence (Ray 19-20). Canadians cannot boast about knowing of events that occurred in Canada thousands of years ago; we have neither the Great Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) nor the decline and fall of the Roman Empire (133-34 B.C.) to put us on the map of recognition.

Despite not being recognized worldwide for its historic events, Canada is often held in high regard for its multiculturalism. Instead of high school students around the world studying about a great Canadian epidemic plague or a legendary Canadian battle, they learn that Canadians are a peaceful, friendly, and polite people. They also learn that Canada is open to and accepting of other cultures and is, as a result, a beautiful cultural mosaic.

Although, when examining the melting pot concept of our American neighbours, this is comparatively true, Canada as a country and Canadians as citizens are not faultless when it comes to their relations with people of other cultures. While Canada’s population is made up of a combination of various ethnicities and cultures, the minority groups are often made to feel that they are not a part of Canadian society. Further, many of these individuals develop a sense of self-hatred.
As literature is a reflection of reality, the writings of ethnic minorities in Canada often reveal this self-hatred. Through their characters, many Canadian authors, including Joy Kogawa, F.G. Paci, and Tomson Highway make this self-hatred apparent. They address this issue in two main ways. Firstly, they reveal some of the causes of self-hatred, which include a character’s physical surroundings, the way a character is viewed by other people, and historical events and acts of negative treatment. Secondly, they reveal the characteristics of a person who suffers from the feeling of self-hatred; in this regard, self-hatred is made evident in the way a person acts to fit in, the expressing of negative feelings against one’s own family and culture, the use of language, and the maintaining of silence. By looking at self-hatred within this framework, Canadian writers like Kogawa, Paci, and Highway are able to expose the hardships and sufferings that ethnic minorities face on a daily basis, thus offering their literary audience a sense of understanding of this self-hatred.

Joy Kogawa: A Brief Biography

Kogawa was born Joy Nozomi Nakayama on June 6, 1935, in Vancouver, British Columbia (“Joy Kogawa”). She lived there until 1941, when, after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Japanese capture of Hong Kong during World War II, the Canadian government sent her and others of the Japanese community to internment camps. Kogawa and her family were sent to the internment camps in Slocan, British Columbia, and Coaldale, Alberta; her family’s possessions were taken away and they were forced to perform field labour (Behnke et al).
In the late 1940s, Kogawa began her post-secondary studies. She studied at several universities, including the University of Alberta, the University of Toronto, and the University of Saskatchewan. In addition to obtaining a university education, she also taught elementary school for a short period of time, raised a family, and, most notably, wrote poetry, children’s books, and novels (ibid). Kogawa’s literary works include *A Choice of Dreams* (1974), *Jericho Road* (1977), and *Obasan* (1981).

**F.G. Paci: A Brief Biography**

Frank G. Paci was born in Pesaro, Italy, in 1948; in 1952, he and his family moved to Sault Ste Marie, Ontario, Canada, which is where he lived until he started to pursue his post-secondary education. He studied at the University of Toronto, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts in English and his Bachelor of Education; he also studied at Carleton University, where he earned his Master of Arts in English. In addition to earning degrees, Paci has also accomplished much else: he has a family, he teaches high school, and he is renowned for his writing. Among his many literary works are *The Italians* (1978), *Black Madonna* (1982), and *Under the Bridge* (1992).

**Tomson Highway: A Brief Biography**

Tomson Highway was born in Manitoba, Canada, on December 6, 1951. He attended the University of Western Ontario, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Music in 1975 and a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1977. In addition to earning three honourary degrees, being the artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto, and becoming a member of the Order of Canada, Highway is best-known for his work as a

*Self-hatred: A Brief Description*

Self-hatred is almost as straightforward as it sounds; simply put, it is the hating of the self. It is the self-loathing, self-abhorring, and self-disrespecting that come as a result of having ill-conceived expectations and a distorted self-image. The possession of a sense of self-hatred is common among members of ethnic minority groups and is often a consequence of believing that all immigrants and Canadian ethnic minorities are inferior to members of the Canadian majority (Pivato 176-177). With this self-hatred often come a low self-esteem and a low self-worth; however, for many of the characters in pieces of ethnic minority writing, this self-hatred may change into self-knowledge and, perhaps eventually, self-acceptance and self-love (ibid 184).

*Causes of Self-hatred: An Introduction*

There are many potential causes for the self-hatred that is bred in ethnic minorities. Like many things, self-hatred is just as much influenced by the society as it is by the individual. A person’s perception and feelings about him/herself is central to the presence and degree of self-hatred (Raskin and Rogers 135). A person’s self-concept is his/her own definition of whom he/she is, “including one’s attributes, emotions, abilities, character, [and] faults” (“Self-Concept”). A significant component of self-concept is self-regard, which is “the aspect of self-concept that develops from the esteem or respect
accorded oneself” (“Self-Regard”). Therefore, the possession of a low self-regard, including a low self-esteem, often results in severe feelings of self-hatred.

However, this self-regard is not solely developed in and of the individual; a person’s relationship with society is the ultimate foundational influence on his/her self-regard, and, therefore, is the cause of self-hatred. “The perception of the ‘I’ or ‘me’ and the perceptions of the relationships of the ‘I’ or ‘me’ to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions,” heavily manipulates a person’s self-regard (Raskin and Rogers 146). Therefore, as one compares oneself to other people and other people’s situations, he/she develops certain conclusions.

Since these conclusions are based on a person’s subjective experiences, they often contain errors or partial truths (Mosak 66). Nevertheless, people accept “these conclusions about themselves and others as if they were true. They are subjective evaluations, biased apperceptions of themselves and of the world, rather than objective ‘reality’” (ibid 66). Therefore, people develop both a self-concept – “the convictions I have about who I am” – and a self-ideal – “the convictions of what I should be or am obliged to be to have a place” (ibid 66). When there is a discrepancy between the two, feelings of inferiority and self-hatred are often created.

This self-image that causes self-hatred grows from various influences in society. The three most common determining factors of self-hatred in ethnic minority writing are a character’s physical surroundings, the way a character is viewed by other people, and historical events and acts of negative treatment. By looking at each of these factors individually, it is seen how society imposes feelings of self-hatred on individuals who belong to various ethnic minority communities.
Surroundings: A Cause of Self-hatred

One of the main causes of feelings of self-hatred in ethnic minorities is their surrounding environments. As seen through the writings of ethnic minorities in Canada, these surroundings can include both the people and the places with which an individual has contact. Seeing people who look different and who are living lifestyles that differ from one’s own can often generate feelings of inadequacy and self-hatred.

People are different in many ways, including their appearances, their personalities, and their social positions. Each of these aspects makes people who they are; in the same way, each can breed both positive and negative feelings within others. In Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan*, the young characters come to an understanding that their physical appearance is different from that of the other children. In Stephen Nakane’s class, he and another boy are the only non-white children; further, he knows that they are different and believes that this difference is significant (Kogawa 90). Recognition of the dissimilarity between him and the other children causes Stephen to want to change; he wants to be less Japanese-Canadian and more “white”-Canadian.

Like her brother Stephen, Naomi also sees fault in being physically different from other people. Although there was a time when she believed herself to be the same as her neighbours (ibid 90), she grew to understand that she was, in fact, not the same. *Obasan* contains many examples of symbolism that demonstrate Naomi’s understanding of the difference between herself and others. One such example is when Naomi looks at a children’s book:
In one of Stephen’s books, there is a story of a child with long golden ringlets called Goldilocks who one day comes to a quaint house in the woods lived in by a family of bears. Clearly, we are the bear family in this strange house in the middle of the woods. I am Baby Bear, whose chair Goldilocks breaks, whose porridge Goldilocks eats, whose bed Goldilocks sleeps in. (ibid 136)

Naomi then expresses her fancy to be something that she is not, to be Goldilocks instead of the bear.

With time, she comes to further understand that her appearance is physically different. Because of the apparent physical differences, Naomi continues to show signs that she believes there to be a flaw in having the physical appearance that she possesses: “To be yellow in the Yellow Peril game is to be weak and small. Yellow is to be chicken. I am not yellow” (ibid 165). Further symbolism shows both the extent of Naomi’s desire to be white and the degree of weakness that people of Naomi’s kind have in comparison to the majority group: “When the yellow chicks grow up they turn white….One time, I remember, a white hen pecked yellow chicks to death, to death in our backyard” (ibid 165). Therefore, identifying the physical differences between herself and others causes Naomi to feel insecure and dissatisfied with herself.

The Nakane siblings from Obasan are not the only ethnic minorities who develop self-hatred because of the people around them. Marcolino (Marco/Mark) Trecroci from F.G. Paci’s Under the Bridge and Champion (Jeremiah) Okimasis from Tomson Highway’s Kiss of the Fur Queen both develop a sense of self-hatred because of the
people with whom they come in contact. The difference between them, however, is that Marco and Jeremiah’s feelings stem from the weaknesses that they see in their own communities as opposed to the strengths in the majority’s communities.

Marco looks at his father and is disgusted with what he sees:

…The sight of the grease and dirt under his nails never failed to shame me with his menial lot in life….With blue eyes and dark hair turning prematurely white, he had the looks of a fading matinee star – unless he opened his mouth and revealed his lack of learning and social polish.

To some extent he made up for his social inadequacies in my eyes by the way he’d work so attentively with his hands – but this didn’t help me when he had to meet my friends or teachers…. I felt he’d never rise up in the world and make me proud. (Paci, Under the Bridge 12-13)

When Marco compares his father’s appearance to the appearance of non-Italian-Canadians, he becomes humiliated by whom he is and from where he comes.

Like Marco, Jeremiah is also ashamed of who he is because of the image that others who share his cultural background maintain. For example, he is so much disgusted with “his weekly bus sightings of drunks on North Main Street” that he begins to deny his own “Indianness” “so utterly that he went for weeks believing his own skin to be as white as parchment” (Highway 123-124). Jeremiah feels that the white people around him were more respectable than those people sharing his cultural background; therefore, he learned to dislike whom he was and, as a result, tried to make himself as white as possible.
In addition to the people with whom members of an ethnic minority group come in contact, places in which they live or to which they visit can also create the feeling of self-hatred. For example, Sandor (Alex) Hunyadi from Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death* is embarrassed of his Hungarian background. He visits other neighbourhoods and compares them to his own. At the beginning of the novel, he vowed to get out of his community and never return: “Some day he would grow up and leave all this, he thought, leave it behind him forever and never look back, never remember this dirty, foreign neighbourhood…” (Marlyn 9). One of the places that Sandor was able to compare to his own neighbourhood was Mrs. Creighton’s house. Simply from being able to cut her lawn, Sandor’s “heart swelled with pride, for it was one of the finest and largest houses on the street” (ibid 69). Mrs. Creighton and her home were the epitome of what Sandor envisioned as ideal; to him, she acted and looked the way the rich English should, and her home did nothing but reflect this.

Like Sandor, the narrator in Anne Jew’s “Everyone Talked Loudly in Chinatown,” presumably Anne Jew herself, develops feelings of self-hatred because of the places that she goes. For example, visiting Chinatown caused her to distance herself from her own Chinese culture. She said that “everyone talked loudly and waved their arms” in Chinatown (Jew 214); this appeared to be the norm in this neighbourhood, but the narrator believed that “it seemed uncivilized” (ibid 214). Therefore, annoyance with a neighbourhood associated with her ethnic background initiated the narrator’s journey away from her true self to her ideal self.

The self-hatred that is felt by all of these characters stems partially from what they see around them. “The basis of this sense of self-loathing is the realization that one is
Unlike people from the majority culture, that one is often regarded as inferior and an outsider” (Pivato 185). There is no doubt that this realization is made by perceiving one’s surroundings; however, it is often further reinforced by the way that one is treated by others.

*Public Image and Public Abuse: A Cause of Self-Hatred*

While self-hatred is a result of a person’s physically visual surroundings, it is also affected by the way a person is viewed and treated. The way that others look at a person, the way they speak to that person, and the way they act with/toward that person all affect a person’s self-image. If the ethnic minority receives negative treatment from others, whether it is from people from the majority culture or from people within his/her own culture, a feeling of self-hatred is likely to develop.

In *Obasan*, the Nakane siblings, Stephen and Naomi, have experiences with the public that let them know that they are not equal, that they are inferior. One such incident occurs during a time when Stephen’s school conducts air raid drills; the students are warned about why they are doing the drills and what may happen to them during this war-inflicted time. Perhaps as a result of this, the students look at Stephen in a different way. They speak to him and treat him in way that makes him question, and hate, himself because of his culture: “The girl with the long ringlets who sits in front of Stephen said to him, ‘All the Jap kids at school are going to be sent away and they’re bad and you’re a Jap’” (Kogawa 76).

Stephen’s inflictions did not end at verbal abuse; he is described as coming home from school with “his glasses broken [and] black tear stains on his face” (ibid 75), thus
leading the reader to believe that he was physically abused by other students because of his Japanese-Canadian background. After Stephen recounts these daily events to Naomi, she asks her father if she and her family are “Japs;” he replies by saying, “No…We’re Canadian” (ibid 76). The following is Stephen’s response to his father’s answer: “It is a riddle…We are both the enemy and not the enemy” (ibid 76). His response shows where he believes the struggle to lie; although he and his family are Canadian, they are seen as something else, something different, something that is a threat. The abuse that comes from this fear causes Stephen to not only develop a low self-esteem, but also a deep feeling of self-hatred.

Like Stephen, Sandor from Under the Ribs of Death must also withstand the worst of the majority culture’s cruelty. While the physical abuse that he receives further produces his self-hatred, it also causes him to identify with his abusers. Throughout the novel, Sandor finds himself trying to avoid a group of young boys that he calls the “English gang.” As early as the opening page of the novel, the reader discovers that “the English gang … chased him home from school every day” (Marlyn 9). Being mocked and beaten by this group of boys is something to which Sandor became accustomed and expected.

Sandor wants to become like his abusers. Despite being beaten by the English gang, he wants to be like the English. Although he was constantly being hunted and severely beaten, he learned to believe that it was justified because of his lowly cultural background. He thinks the English population in general, including the boys of the English gang, are superior and ideal, and he believes he could be that way, too, if he
could only disassociate himself from “the foreigners and the poor immigrants of Winnipeg’s North End” and erase his Hungarian background (Pivato 175).

The comments and actions from the majority culture can have a long-lasting effect on the self-opinion of all ethnic minorities; however, the comments and actions from people within their own cultural community can often achieve the same consequence. One character among the many in Canadian ethnic minority writing who experiences this is Marie Barone from F.G. Paci’s *Black Madonna*. She finds herself even more distanced from her family and culture because of the way she is treated in her parents’ home. For example, Assunta, Marie’s mother, says the following about Marie:

“*Ma*, shut up!” she screamed at him. “She comes once a year to visit us and she acts like this. Look at her. She’s all bones. She can’t even take care of herself. What is she doing down there? She tells us nothing. And then she comes back and acts like this! Like a snot-nose. What did we do wrong to get a daughter like this?” (Paci, *Black Madonna* 102)

By the time of this argument, Marie had already developed a sense of self-hatred; however, being yelled at and being called “an ingrata” (ibid 102) by her mother confirmed her desire to not be a part of her Italian-Canadian family.

There are many others like Marie whose self-hatred becomes even more deeply rooted because of the comments and actions of people close to them. In her essay “I Didn’t Know I Was Different,” Jenine Dumont relates her experiences as a Native
Canadian and explains why she has a hard time not hating herself because of her cultural background:

I walked that way so much that in high school people thought I was a snob; I really was shy and afraid of being hurt. I had some difficulty being proud of my Indian ancestry, as there were constant reminders that Indians were inferior. My own mother referred to Indians as “les sauvages” (the savages), as if they were inferior. (Dumont 73)

Dumont recalls other incidents as well, encounters that reminded her that she was not white (ibid 73); however, it is perhaps the experiences concerning her own mother’s negative comments that cut the deepest: once she is wounded and exposed, it is difficult for her to control the festering of self-hatred that takes place within her mind and her soul.

Stephen and Naomi Nakane, Sandor Hunyadi, Marie Barone, and Jenine Dumont are all characters in the works of Canadian ethnic minorities who suffer from an impression of self-hatred. A partial cause of this engrained self-loathing is the way they are viewed, spoken to, and treated by people from both the majority culture and their own cultures. The comments they hear and the treatment they receive are often regular occurrences in their everyday lives; they live with this negativity and learn that they are, because of their cultural backgrounds, inferior to the majority of Canadians.
Sometimes the negative treatment that ethnic minorities receive stems from something larger than the events of their own neighbourhood or city; sometimes these incidents of maltreatment are well known nationwide. Often, ethnic minorities are mistreated because of monumental and/or historical events and existing deep-seated stereotypes, none of which is a justifiable reason. Even though this maltreatment is not warranted, the people at the receiving end frequently embark on a journey of self-loathing.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah and Gabriel actually suffer one of the well-known injustices that Canada’s native population was forced to endure: the residential schools. During their stay at the school, the Okimasis brothers experience many things that evidently shape the remainder of their lives. For example, Gabriel was sexually abused by Father Lafleur: “Through his slitted eyes, he could see that the motion of the priest’s hand obviously gave him immense pleasure…” (Highway 78). Gabriel grew up to be a homosexual man. Whether this was truly a direct effect of the abuse he received at the hands of the priest or not, his brother Jeremiah was under the impression that it was. Although the abuse did not cause Gabriel to visibly hate himself, it did cause his brother to look at him with disdain.

Jeremiah also learned to look at other things with disdain, such as the rituals and mythology that he learned growing up with his parents. One of the core purposes of the residential schools was to assimilate the Natives by taking away their spirituality and replacing it with a Christian spirituality; as one attendee admits, “Our ways of worship were condemned and prohibited” (Grant 232). As a substitute, Jeremiah and Gabriel were
forced to pray to the Christian God and saints. Not knowing the correct words, only saying what they sounded like, and not understanding the meaning behind them, the boys would obediently utter the prayers: “Hello merry, mutter of cod, play for ussinees, now anat tee ower of ower beth, aw, men” (Highway 71). Eventually, this change of religion instilled within Jeremiah a sense of ill regard toward his own people’s native rituals (ibid 176).

In addition to not being able to practice their rituals, forced to attend the residential schools, the children were not allowed to speak their native languages, such as Cree:

“Mootha nantow. Aymeeskweewuk anee-i, “Jeremiah replied with as much reassurance as he could muster.

As if from the air, a grinning Father Lafleur appeared behind the brothers and, a with a gentle touch to Jeremiah’s left shoulder, purred.

“Now, Jeremiah. You know you’re not to speak Cree once you’re off the plan.” (ibid 70)

Historically, children in the residential schools received physical punishments, such as having their tongues pinched, for speaking any language other than English (Breaking the Silence). The “English only” rule was enforced because the people who ran these schools, primarily the church and the government, had certain goals to accomplish: “A rule against speaking Indian languages was part of the same effort to ensure a thorough transformation of character” (Webster 179). Unfortunately, the goal was met; these characters were forever changed. There is no question that Jeremiah, Gabriel, and
other attendees of the residential schools were greatly affected in a negative way: “‘Them little ol’ priests…the things they did? Pooh! No wonder us Indian folk are all the shits’” (Highway 175). Within the confines of the residential school, a low self-worth was created and a sense of self-hatred was bred; this self-hatred continued to grow throughout the lives of Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis.

Like Jeremiah and Gabriel, Stephen and Naomi Nakane suffer a great deal and develop feelings of self-loathing because of historical events. Despite being Japanese-Canadians living within Canada, they endured great torment because of the Japanese involvement in World War II: “The things that go on in wartime!...War breeds utter insanity. Here at home there’s mass hatred of us simply because we’re of Japanese origin” (Kogawa 90). This hatred not only included discrimination and harassment from other Canadian citizens, but it also consisted of official, legal discrimination from the Canadian government. Under the War-Time Measures Act, Canadians of Japanese ancestry were sent to ghost towns and detention camps, and their possessions were confiscated and sold (The Internment). The prejudice and persecution that resulted from these historical events caused Naomi and Stephen to question who they are, and when they discovered the answer, they were not content. Years later, Naomi still wants to leave the past behind:

And I am tired, I suppose, because I want to get away from all this. From the past and all these papers, from the present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words. I want to break loose from the heavy identity, the evidence of rejection, the
unexpressed passion, the misunderstood politeness.

(Kogawa 201)

Therefore, both while they were taking place and later in her life, Naomi’s experiences affected her significantly. Through other people’s reactions to historical events, she and her brother learnt that they were different and inferior.

Aritha van Herk also faces discrimination because of historical events and the stereotypes that have been created as a result of these historical events. Her cultural background is Dutch and, although she was not a participant in such historical events as the Boer War and apartheid, she is on the receiving end of other people’s hate, which, in turn, plants the seed to her own self-hatred. In her “Of Dykes and Boers and Drowning,” van Herk describes common stereotypes that she, as a Dutch woman, cannot avoid. For examples, she mentions the lack of generosity insinuated with the term “going Dutch” and the “associations of servitude and boorishness, not to mention rascality and baseness, rusticity, uncouthness, and yes, certainly, simple simple-mindedness” connected to the term “Dutch boer” (van Herk 422). As a result of the cruelty that she encounters, van Herk learned that she was inferior and, consequently, because of her self-hatred, tried to forget about and get rid of her Dutch background.

The Okimasis brothers, the Nakane siblings, and Aritha van Herk are only a few among the many ethnic minority characters and/or people who succumb to self-hatred because of historical events. Both being directly and indirectly involved in the situation can have a significant impact on anyone. Despite not bringing harm or offense to others, their innocence could not veil them from the seemingly unavoidable intolerance and
inequity that is attached to their cultural backgrounds. As a result, damage to their self-esteem and self-worth was also apparently inescapable.

*Self-Hatred Made Apparent: An Introduction*

There are numerous elements that can potentially cause self-hatred; however, how these elements are interpreted and acted upon depends on the individual. Two people may be involved in the same situation but react in different ways. This is because it is not necessarily the situation but the person that decides the outcome: “When a highly charged emotional consequence (C) follows a significant activating event (A), event A may seem to, but actually does not, cause C. Instead, emotional consequences are largely created by B – the individual’s *belief system*” (Ellis 168).

This belief system can be affected by many things, such as the way a person is raised. Different belief systems will cause people to develop different emotions and react in diverse ways. One determining factor of a person’s emotions and actions is the comparison of one’s own situation to another potential or imaginary situation (Ben-Ze’ev 19-21); if someone else has a better life, then a person may desire such a life and feel motivated enough to try to achieve it. Therefore, “how a person will perform in particular situations” depends on such issues as “his or her *expectancies*” and “the *subjective values* of any expected outcomes” (Wilson 215).

Another factor is a situation or event’s “strength, reality, and relevance, and factors related to the subject’s background circumstances, for instance, controllability of the eliciting event, readiness for such an event, and deservingness of it” (ibid 16); these are all aspects that can affect people’s emotions and, as a result, actions. Therefore,
depending on people’s viewpoints, there are different intensities of self-hatred and various ways to make this self-hatred evident.

Some of the ways that ethnic minorities make their self-loathing apparent can be seen in numerous works of Canadian literature. The four most obvious ways that feelings of self-hatred are revealed are through a person’s actions to fit in, negative feelings towards their own family and culture, use of language, and preservation of silence. Some of the characters display their feelings in a very outward manner, and some are very subtle. However, the way they conduct themselves on the whole makes apparent their self-hatred because of their cultural backgrounds.

Efforts to Belong: An Effect of Self-hatred

The ethnic minority characters in many pieces of writing try to change their circumstances. Although “the most efficient way of effecting lasting emotional and behavioural change is for people to change their thinking” (Dryden 3), characters instead often try to change who they are. As a result, they do certain things that they think will help them belong in the cultural group of the majority. For examples, Canadian authors reveal that their characters try to obliterate their background; to do this, the characters often change such parts of their lives as their eating habits, names, and physical location.

In “Of Dykes and Boers and Drowning,” Aritha van Herk readily admits that she wanted to sever the ties that she had with her cultural background. Leaving no room for opposition, she states, “I have tried and remarkably succeeded in effacing as much as possible of both my Dutch and my boer” (van Herk 425). Similar to van Herk’s work, in Black Madonna, Paci leaves no room for the reader to question whether or not Marie
Barone wants to be rid of her Italian background. During an encounter between Marie and her brother Joey, the author reveals the sister’s desire to forget her heritage: “It was he who had lived in the house all these years while she was off getting educated, effacing all the marks of her Italian blood” (Paci, *Black Madonna* 15). This revelation takes place near the beginning of the novel, thus preparing the reader for the ways that Marie will try to accomplish this task. Ethnic minorities like Aritha and Marie make many attempts at effacing their cultural backgrounds; some of these attempts are unique to the individual, yet there are also many actions that are all too common.

One of the more common actions to remove oneself from a culture and fit in to the majority culture is related to eating habits. Because food is closely related to culture, many characters see a connection between taking the ethnic food out of the diet and taking the ethnicity out of the person. Marie Barone of *Black Madonna* is one of these characters:

Since her first year at university she had stopped eating Italian food altogether. Later it wasn’t only Italian food, but anything having to do with her mother’s particular dishes. Marie found herself unable to eat chicken anymore, or spare ribs, or steak, or broccoli, or veal, or even crusty bread…Lately she had come to survive purely on such health foods as cottage cheese, wheat germ, oats, and natural yogurt. (ibid 100)
For Marie, food is obviously a significant part of her Italian culture and family; therefore, she narrows the selection of food options that she is willing to eat. By making such limitations, she feels that she is also limiting her Italian qualities.

Stephen Nakane in Kogawa’s *Obasan* as well sees the connection between culture and food. His distaste for Japanese culture can be seen in his reaction toward his aunt, Obasan: “Stephen is scowling as Obasan returns and offers him a rice ball. ‘Not that kind of food,’ he says” (Kogawa 123). Like Marie, Stephen attributes food to culture; perhaps he believes that if he removes Japanese food from his diet, then he will succeed in becoming less Japanese.

While food is definitely a part of culture, names are perhaps even more obviously so. Therefore, while some people change their eating habits, most people change their names in order to belong in society. Because of this, it is not unusual for characters in ethnic minority writing to change their names; in fact, it may be considered unusual if they do not desire this change. Joy Kogawa makes evident the importance that the young Japanese children put on an effective name change:

Almost all of us have shortened names – Tak for Takao, Sue for Sumiko, Mary for Mariko. We all hide our long names as well as we can. My books are signed M. Naomi N., or Naomi M.N. If Megumi were the only name I had, I’d be called Meg. Meg Na Kane. Pity the Utsunomiya kids for their long, unspellable unpronounceable surname. Oots gnome ya. Or the Iwabuchis. The Ey Bushy. (ibid 222)
In the paragraph following this one, Kogawa confirms that it is not only the Japanese children who desire a name change in order to fit in; the teacher once called a Native girl named Annie Black Bear “Annie Black” by mistake. As a result, “Annie looked so pleased – throwing a furtive happy swift glance at me” (ibid 222).

This changing of a name seems to be one of the easiest and most popular actions that ethnic minorities do in order to fit in. Marie from Black Madonna shortened her first name; at times, her mother calls her by her full name, Marietta. Sandor Hunyadi from Under the Ribs of Death prefers to be called by a name other than his own; at the beginning of the novel, he calls himself Alex Humphrey, and near the end of the novel, he changes his name to Alex Hunter. Marco from Under the Bridge goes by different names; his full first name is Marcolino, but he goes by Marco, Mark, and Markie. All of these characters find some relief in changing their names; they feel that by making their names “less ethnic,” they too will be less ethnic and, therefore, integrate better with the majority society.

In addition to changing their eating habits and names, ethnic minorities in Canadian writing feel that they can get closer to society by getting further away from their own cultures. As a result, they make the effort to learn about other cultures, as does Marco from Under the Bridge:

“When I’m reading, Father,” I tried to explain as best I could, “I’m exploring different worlds, different countries, different beliefs –”

“And not your own?”
“I don’t fit in with my own. I feel like a stranger in my own home.” (Paci, *Under the Bridge* 79-80)

At times, they even try to physically run away from their own cultures, as is the case with a character from another of Paci’s novels:

“What’s wrong with you, Joey,” she said. What could I do? I don’t even belong here. I have never belonged here.”

“So you left, uh…So you never came back, uh.”


Marie from *Black Madonna* leaves her home behind because she would rather belong somewhere else. In fact, she accomplishes this; she has done so much to get away from her culture that other people do not recognize her as an Italian: “Gee, Mrs. Charlton [Marie’s married name], I didn’t know that. You don’t sound or look Italian at all” (ibid 138).

As Naomi from *Obasan* notes, “When yellow chicks grow up they turn white” (Kogawa 165). Therefore, there are numerous things that ethnic minorities will do as a result of their self-hatred. They believe that belonging to society will help ease their pain and self-loathing; however, even after they “grow up to be white,” who they really are is still engrained and the self-hatred continues to persist.

**Negative Feelings: An Effect of Self-hatred**

While the actions an ethnic minority takes as a result of self-hatred are usually centred around the individual, there is another effect of self-hatred that is likely to harshly
impinge on others. One way that self-hatred is made evident is through expressed negative feelings toward one’s own culture. These negative feelings can be seen through the resentment of family members, other people who are ethnic minorities, and cultural rituals.

Firstly, self-hatred is revealed in the home towards family members. This is seen most clearly in the character of Marie Barone from Paci’s *Black Madonna*. Throughout the entirety of the novel, her character holds such a strong resentment against her family, especially her mother:

…she was overtaken by a blinding hatred of her mother. Of her ignorant peasant ways and her stupid dialect. Of her screaming. And her abominable eating habits. Her cheap hairspray and the way she had her hair done…” (Paci, *Black Madonna* 74)

Many of these same things that cause Marie to hate her mother also cause her to be ashamed of her mother (ibid 39). Marie is repulsed and humiliated by her own mother because she is too Italian, she retains too many Italian qualities. Marie distances herself from her mother and believes them to be so different that she even questions, “How can she be my mother?” (ibid 17).

In the same way that Marie completely distinguishes herself from her Italian mother, Marco from *Under the Bridge* also finds himself to be different than his family. He knows that they live in the same house, but he feels that they are living on different planets:
Whether we passed in the hall, or we were watching TV, or sitting down to dinner, my sister and I hardly gave each other a passing glance. The mere sight of her enraged me. It seemed we were each in our separate worlds. My parents in their little world of house and neighbours. My sister in her room, with her own friends. And me in my room, inside their world, with my own bridge to the outside world.

(Paci, *Under the Bridge* 119)

Because of the hatred that he feels for himself, Marco reveals abhorrence and resentment toward his own family.

Self-hatred is also made manifest by expressions of hatred of others. This is seen through many characters of all cultural backgrounds. For example, Paci reveals this effect of self-hatred in his novels, including *Black Madonna*, through the character of Marie, and *Under the Bridge*, through the character of Marco. Marie’s negative feelings concerning other Italians are very strong. Not only was her neighbourhood “intolerable to her” because “she found almost everything about it either obnoxious or trite” (Paci, *Black Madonna* 29), but she would even attempt to “drown out” the sound of Italian voices because she regarded them as “exuberant and sickening” (ibid 66). Marie even grows to think of her childhood friend Rita as “too Italian” (ibid 30). Reminiscent of Marie, Marco from *Under the Bridge* shows revulsion of the Italian language and his parents’ Italian friends; he does this by calling his parents’ home “intolerable” because neighbourhood friends visited and “the incessant Italian dialogue grated [his] ears” (Paci, *Under the Bridge* 39).
In a similar way that the sound of the Italian language bothered Marie and Marco, the scent of people bothered the character of Sandor from *Under the Ribbs of Death*:

“They even smelled foreign” (Marlyn 13). Apparently, even just the smell of the boarders who lived in his parents’ house induced negative reactions and signs of intolerance from Sandor. Like Sandor, Jenine Dumont’s Métis friends were prejudiced against other natives: “All the women were the same, trying to be white and rather intolerant of Indians or the mixed bloods who had more Indian ancestry than we did” (Dumont 73). Dumont makes it clear in “I Didn’t Know I Was Different” that this intolerance was a presence in her life as she was growing up. Being exposed to this as a child can increase the severity of the expressions of self-hatred, as it did with Naomi of *Obasan*: “…Mark woke up to find Nomi sitting on his pillow, hitting the Japanese doll you gave her” (Kogawa 87).

In addition to revealing negative feelings towards people like family members, neighbours, and people in general, ethnic minorities sometimes also disclose their self-hatred by expressing negative feelings towards such distinct aspects of the culture as rituals. One way that this is revealed is by refusing to take part in these customs. In *Under the Bridge*, when Marco’s father tried to get him to drink the homemade wine, Marco “wanted no part of his Italian rituals” (Paci, *Under the Bridge* 52).

Another way that negative feelings about cultural practices are revealed is simply through the person’s thoughts. In Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah’s thoughts are often disclosed to the reader. For example, when he saw Amanda Clear Sky dressed in her regalia, he held back his true thoughts: “‘Amanda?’ Jeremiah squinted at the spectre. ‘Is that you? In that…get-up?’ stopping himself just this side of the adjective ‘ridiculous’” (Highway 172). Further, Jeremiah’s thoughts conform to the idea that native
rituals are “devil worship” (ibid 176) and that the “Indian religion” is “pagan” and practiced by “savages” (ibid 184).

While the self-loathing that many ethnic minorities have is a personal feeling, one result of it is negative feelings, such as hatred and resentment, towards both people and things. By making these negative feelings related to family, other people, and rituals evident, a person also makes negative feelings concerning himself or herself apparent.

*Use of Language: An Effect of Self-hatred*

As has been noted, ethnic minorities will often distance themselves from their culture as a result of their feelings of self-hatred. Another part of the culture that they distance themselves from is the language. Many ethnic minorities who want to conserve their culture warn against the effect of losing culture by losing the language. While speaking to Joey Barone, the priest makes the connection between culture and language clear: “You grow away from your mother tongue. You lose your culture and your heritage. And then you become strangers with your parents” (Paci, *Black Madonna* 158). Because of this connection, many people refuse to learn the language of the majority; they have a fear of losing their own language and culture, as is the case with the mother in “Why My Mother Can’t Speak English”: “How can I teach her to speak the language when she is too old to learn, too old to want to learn? She resists anything that is fan gwei. She does everything the Chinese way” (Engkent 132). Although this mother has lived in Canada for over thirty years, she refuses to do anything the Canadian way, including learning the Canadian language, because she is afraid of growing away from her Chinese heritage.
Instead of having a fear of losing her Italian culture, Marie Barone from *Black Madonna* has a fear of retaining it. Therefore, she makes a great effort to obtain strong English skills, thus trading in her Italian language skills. She perceives a certain strength in using the English language, which can be seen in one of the arguments that she has with her brother Joey: “Yet she had the power of language over him. He felt like a bumpkin in front of her when she was articulating those fancy phrases she had picked up in the big city” (Paci, *Black Madonna* 9). Although Marie is stronger because of her knowledge of the English language, this strength comes at a price; she becomes weak when speaking to others who do not understand English, such as her mother: “She knew it was no use saying anything. The words would only start deep down in her stomach as convincing English and plop out of her mouth like marbles in childish Italian” (ibid 28). However, as she does not care about communicating with her mother, and since she willingly distances herself from her mother, this is a sacrifice that Marie is willing to make.

Like Marie, Marco from *Under the Bridge* also has a difficult time talking to his mother in Italian because his vocabulary in his mother tongue is weak: “And I’d try to explain in dialetto, in my annually dwindling vocabulary, the intracies of plot and character development” (Paci, *Under the Bridge* 37). Marco has a difficult time communicating with his mother because his knowledge of the Italian language is continuously decreasing. He finds this lack of ability frustrating at times, thus he ends up placing some of the blame on his mother: “‘Why can’t you learn English, uh? Why can’t you be like the other mothers, for heaven’s sake?’” (ibid 37).
In the novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah’s self-hatred is revealed through his language of choice. While attending the residential schools, he was forced to speak English; anything else would have earned a punishment. However, he does not return to his mother tongue even when he leaves the schools forever. Like Marie and Marco, he chooses to speak English; therefore, he loses the knowledge he once had of the Cree language:

“*Tansi.*”

Jeremiah stopped breathing. In the two years he had spent in this city so lonely that he regularly considered swallowing his current landlady’s entire stock of angina pills, he had given up his native tongue to the roar of traffic.

“Say that again?”


(Highway 113)

Through years of not speaking Cree, Jeremiah lost his language and, therefore, lost a part of his native culture. He became so engulfed in the ways of the English language and the English population that “answering in Cree was the last thing on his mind. His English rang out like a white boy’s” (ibid 160).

There are many names on the list of ethnic minorities who choose the English language over their own mother tongues. In addition to the ones already discussed, there is also the Korean-Canadian Sun-Kyung Yi who “spoke more fluent English than
Korean” (Yi 293), the Japanese-Canadian Stephen Nakane who “has made himself altogether unfamiliar with speaking Japanese” (Kogawa 253), and the Hungarian-Canadian Sandor Hunyadi who does not understand Hungarian (Marlyn 12). There are also many names on the list of ethnic minorities who resent people of their own cultural group because they either retained their mother tongue or they are not fluent in English. To add on to the ones already mentioned, Sandor seems to be disgusted at the foreigners’ lack of effort to learn English (ibid 13) and Stephen reveals his impatience by telling family members to “talk properly” (Kogawa 87). As is the situation with all of the characters, self-hatred is revealed through their choice of language and their reaction toward other people’s choice of language.

Silence: An Effect of Self-hatred

Sometimes people use different languages to express their self-hatred, and sometimes people use no language at all. “Silence is a way of covering over the self-hatred the immigrant may feel” (Pivato 175). Throughout Kogawa’s novel Obasan, Naomi maintains her silence; however, while hiding her self-hatred, this silence also reveals it. She admits, “I cannot tell about this time, Aunt Emily. The body will not tell” (Kogawa 217). Like Naomi, the mother, Giulia, from Maria Ardizzi’s novel Made in Italy also remains silent; she is both inarticulate and invisible in her family, thus effacing “herself to the point of non-existence” (Pivato 175).

Being silent means not revealing a weakness, not making oneself more vulnerable to others, and not reminding oneself of what causes the internal pain. Overall, silence allows “the immigrants in Canada … to survive undisturbed” (Pivato 175). Although this
may seem logical – since the sound of silence often soothes – the maintenance of silence ultimately allows the self-hatred to fester. Without the expression of one’s discontent, there is the anticipated possibility of further self-destruction.

Conclusion

Self-hatred is unfortunately not an uncommon feeling among ethnic minorities in Canada. As literature is a reflection of reality, many Canadian ethnic minority writers expose this self-hatred through their characters. This sense of self-loathing is planted and fertilized by many factors, including one’s surroundings, the way a person is viewed and treated by others, and historical events. In the same way that there are many causes of self-hatred, there are also many ways that this self-hatred is revealed, including a person’s actions, feelings, language, and silence. Although many of the characters continue to show signs of low self-regard throughout their lives, there are also characters who seem to come to terms with it. Among many others, Naomi Nakane from Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, Marie Barone from F.G. Paci’s Black Madonna, and Jeremiah Okimasis from Tomson Highway’s Kiss of the Fur Queen seem to venture on a journey of self-acceptance. They all appear to reflect on themselves and their cultures after the deaths of family members and/or the endurance of a series of events. Therefore, although self-hatred is manifest in the writings of ethnic minorities in Canada, the final conclusions are not always as grim as to be expected; along with the sense of self-loathing and self-disrespect comes a sense of optimism and hope.
Works Cited


<<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/kogawa_joy_nakayama.html>>


