CHAPTER III
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Joy Kogawa, SKY Lee and Amy Tan in *Obasan, Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* respectively attempt to depict a kind of history by discussing familial situations and issues pertaining to their respective communities. The three writers pay more attention to the past and portray the pitiable conditions of their community in the settled society, which in some cases were hidden from the world. The three novels utilize a narrator who belongs to either the second, third or fourth generation and who is therefore suitable to reconstruct the past. *Obasan* is narrated by Naomi, a third generation Japanese-Canadian wherein she mingles the story of her personal history with that of the community. The novel’s narrative reveals the historical truth of discrimination as encountered by the Japanese-Canadian community during and after the World War II. Similarly, *Disappearing Moon Café* is presented through the character of Kae, a fourth generation Wong, who attempts to write the familial history as a book. *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* once again is a personal story of Ruth, a second generation Chinese-American. Her narration refers to the story of her grandmother and her mother and also about life in China and in the US. Thus one can perceive that the novels besides dealing with familial and communal aspects also throw light on individual identities. These novels, in a way, attempt to explain, how the history of the nation is itself faulty because it does not take into consideration the presence of the immigrant community nor pay attention to the hardships undergone by these communities.
In order to revise this canon of history, *Obasan, Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* display the pathos of the immigrant existence. Therefore, the narrators, Naomi, Kae and Ruth present a parallel history of the nation which reveals the hegemonic stances of the official governments. In this attempt of tracing history they end up expanding more time in the past rather than in the present or future. In this chapter a discussion of the three novels in terms of history is carried out. The retrieval of history as already pointed out happens at two levels namely personal or individualistic and public or communal. Personal history is presented by the experience of the individual through the angle of historical change while the public or communal is discussed through the depiction of documents and diaries. In this discussion one has to remember that the present moment of history cannot alter or change any of the past events of history. In order to portray the anguish and pity of the diasporic communities, the novels portray the pitiable condition of the community in the settled lands and the narratives try to explain the production and reproduction of the diasporic identities which is fragmented. The analysis of the novels *Obasan, Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is strengthened by adopting Bakhtin’s idea of chronotope as explained in “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel”. Bakhtin in this work refers to ‘Historical Inversion’ and discusses how time can be divided into past, present and future.

**Temporal Factors:**

*Obasan, Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* have a number of references utilizing, time as the major part of the narrative. Due to the movement of the characters from the homeland to the settled land, memories, nostalgia and remembrance play a major role. The characters within the span of the narrative move from the past to the present and vice versa. The utilization of the past and present too is done variously in the three novels. In *Obasan*, the juxtaposition of the past and present is repeated one after the other, where as in
Disappearing Moon Café the past and present are intermingled seeming to make it as one whole moment of the present. In The Bonesetter’s Daughter a similar pattern as Obasan exists. In both Obasan and The Bonesetter’s Daughter through time references the history of women’s life too is traced.

Utilization of time forms a significant feature of the narrative in the novels. Bakhtin is of the view that literature’s main method of representation is temporal and therefore nothing could possibly be explained outside the passage of time. According to this concept, if the passage of time is taken away from its relationship to past and present, then the present loses its validity (146). With this view when one looks at the narrative within the novels, one can notice that the present is continuously incorporating the past but not so much the future. The reason is that the aspect of time has a dual nature as much of it is rooted in the past. This past gets disassociated due to social constructions and the writers try to build up new terms “to uncover social contradictions” (147). Such a factor of building up utilizing the past has been referred to as “transpositioning or historical inversion” (147) by Bakhtin. The diasporic writer definitely stresses the time factor by the narrator’s move from the past to the present and from the present to the past and at the same time also gets located in the location in which one exists. The diasporic character exists in between an individual significance, namely the past and the physical dimension, namely the present (150). This is true in the characters represented in Obasan, Disappearing Moon Café and The Bonesetter’s Daughter, wherein the past is presented through the lens of history while the present is revealed through depictions of personal experiences as well as non-personal experiences of the characters. One must also at this juncture remember that the character’s move into the past is only imaginative because the past is not dynamic and cannot be changed.
Every individual presented in *Obasan* such as Stephen, Naomi’s parents and grandparents are realized for the reader through the perspective of Naomi. This kind of work is necessary because Naomi desires to find out the reason for her mother’s disappearance:

Seeking to unravel the mystery of her mother’s disappearance at the beginning of the Pacific War, Naomi must also unravel the mystery of the disappearance of a whole community of Japanese Canadians who uncomplainingly accepted the Government’s Orders-in-Council to exile them from their West coast homes to the Canadian interior, the story of ‘the Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei, the Japanese Canadians.’ (Lim: 301-302)

The non-personal history is brought in through Aunt Emily’s diaries, letters and documents. These ably portray the sufferings faced by the Japanese-Canadians as when Naomi states that they are the ‘despised’ the ‘voiceless’ and ‘the train load of eyes covered with mud and spittle’. She further adds that “We are those pioneers who cleared the bush and the forest with out hands, the gardeners tending and attending the soil with our tenderness, the fishermen who are flung from the sea to flounder in the dust of the prairies” (112). The same idea of personal time and non-personal time is referred by Helena Grice as personal time and public time in the article, “Reading the Nonverbal: The Indices of Space, Time, Tactility and Taciturnity in Joy Kogawa’s Obasan”:

Naomi’s discontinuous narrative stresses the interplay between the past and present as well as the chafing of personal and official chronologies. Naomi’s and Obasan’s time is private, subjective and measured by the events of their lives. In contrast, Aunt Emily’s letters, reports and newspaper articles represent the public, verbalized chronology of the Japanese-Canadian history. Or to put it another way, Naomi’s time is informal, mental time, whereas Aunt Emily’s papers represent a measured and formalized
temporality. Naomi’s temporality, which structures the narration, is constructed by memory, so specific events in her life measure the passing of time. (95)

Naomi and Obasan in Obasan depict their personal perspectives. Although Naomi is reluctant to bring in the past of her community, she is unable to wipe off her past memories. At one point in the novel she mentions that Obasan and she were trapped by “memories of the dead” and then they seem to be “like threads of old spider webs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart”. She adds to explain how memories haunt them “When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark spinning netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in the old and complex puzzles” (26). In a way, the novel, thus reveals that Obasan is unable to move away from the past without thinking that it is ancient for, she repeatedly states “Now old…. Everything old” (16). These words of Obasan trigger off Naomi’s memories of her grandparents. The novel also utilizes photographs to explain the happy family that had existed at one point of time.

Many critics think that Kogawa’s Obasan is a representation of an oppressed history as Turcotte mentions, the novel’s “re-animating’ a history of oppression” that ultimately “forced Canadians to confront their own suppressed and unacknowledged violent history” (126). The reference to the past time can be visualized as a past before the war and a past during and after war. The representation of life before war reveals a presence of the pleasant harmonious family. Naomi recollects the comfort and luxury of this period,

When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food. If I am weary, every place is a bet. No food that is distasteful must be eaten and there is neither praise nor blame for the body’s natural functions. A need to urinate is to be heeded whether in public or
visiting friends. A sweater covers me before there is any chill and if there is pain there is care simultaneously. (56)

The later memories are unpleasant and reveal the pathos that creeps into the Japanese-Canadian families. World War II was the cause of this change in the attitude of the Canadian government. As a result they looked at the Japanese-Canadians with suspicious eye. “We were the unwilling communicants receiving and consuming a less than holy nourishment, our eyes, cups filling with the bitter wine of a loveless communion” (182). It considers all the Japanese-Canadians as spies of the Japanese government. So the Canadians decide to erase the Japanese community from Canada. Whatever the Japanese-Canadians did was viewed cynically and suspiciously by the Canadian government:

In one breath we are damned for being “inassimilable” and the next there’s fear that we’ll assimilate. One reporter points to those among us who are living in poverty and says, “No British subject would live in such conditions”. Then if we improve our lot, another says, “There is danger that they will enter our better neighborhoods”. If we are educated the complaint is that we will cease being the “ideal servant”. It makes me choke. The diseases, the crippling, the twisting of our souls is still to come. (87)

The Japanese-Canadians are made to leave their home, and settle in places decided by the government. In the process their things are taken away by the government and their houses are looted. They are not allowed to carry their things along with them or to sell them. The novel poetically explains the gloominess of the time:

The darkness is everywhere, in the day as well as the night. It threatens us as it always has, in the streetcars, in the stores, on the streets, in all public places. It covers the entire city and causes all the lights to be turned out. It drones overhead in the sounds of
airplanes. It rushes unbidden from the mouths of strangers and in the taunts of children. (69-70)

As the war goes on Naomi’s family too loses objects as well as people. Her grandparents are separated and are sent to live in Slocan which is like a ghost town. The children, Naomi and Stephen are separated from their parents and are forced to live with their aunt (Obasan) and uncle. Many Japanese-Canadian families were dislocated and were sent to live in towns that were “ghost towns such as Slocan” (77). These were mining settlements and abandoned towns. The Japanese communities were made to relocate themselves in such places.

After three years, Naomi’s family members are ordered by the government to move from Slocan to Alberta. In Alberta her family stays in a single room hut and Naomi and Stephen are allowed to study in a school meant for the Japanese-Canadian community. Due to this kind of life Naomi finds any discussion of war painful. Much later as an adult Naomi still feels the pain and misery of that period and does not want to discus it with anyone. She states,

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. I am tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum, unable to shout or sing or dance, unable to scream or swear, unable to laugh, unable to breathe out loud. (183)

Although Naomi is not interested in the past, her Aunt Emily is continuously struggling to re-view the past and to present Naomi with the glimpse of the Japanese-Canadian history: “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!” (49-50). Naomi finds that the diaries were short historical accounts describing the treatment meted to the Japanese-Canadians. The reason why Aunt Emily kept hankering for this kind of past is that she thought that in a way this past is the future. Aunt Emily is of the opinion that the government instead of showing its loyalty towards them shows it for the White people of other countries. Although the restrictions imposed on Japanese-Canadians were reversed in 1949, there is not much change in the attitude towards them by the official authority. Herewith, Naomi portrays a subjective temporality bringing into the story, the hurt felt by her, the anguish faced by her people and her distaste of the war and its effects. Aunt Emily, on the other hand, presents her non-personal temporality utilizing public discourses such as official documents, legal statements, etc to make known the politics of the period. Commenting on the use of Aunt Emily’s narration, Teruyo Ueki points out:

Her voice provides a historical background to Naomi’s personal memories about the three different places where she has been brought up – Vancouver, Slocan, and Granton. Emily’s narration discloses the buried historical and political facts of the Japanese-Canadian’s internment and her indictment against the covered-up crimes and euphemised language of the official letters and the documents released by the government. (6)

The contemporary time in the novel, Obasan enables to provide a focus on the life of the narrator in the present. In Obasan, Naomi works as a school teacher in the present. She faces severe identity problems due to her appearance and name. Her discomfort to talk with others and inability to mingle with her students indicates her identity problem. Naomi comes home to take care of her Aunt Obasan when her uncle dies. At that time she looks at the papers, diaries and documents which Aunt Emily has sent to her some years ago. She feels
uncomfortable to read about the discrimination faced by her community people in Canada and it results in her postponement of reading. On the day of her uncle’s death, she reads those papers and her reading presents the past to the readers.

During her childhood, Naomi has an intimate relationship with her mother. When her mother leaves for Japan, she begins to live in silence. It is interesting to note that Teruyo Ueki reads the mother as a symbolic presence. He feels that “Although tenderness is often associated with fragility or vulnerability, Kogawa describes it as the inner strength of Japanese motherhood” (11). Aunt Emily in her diary entry mentions that most of the time Naomi is silent. Due to it she slowly isolates herself from others and lives in silence. This non-communicative stance of Naomi increases later on due to the problems they faced during the World War II. It results in her uneasiness to communicate with others and even with her students. Naomi mentions that, “I lack communication skills” (224). This internalizing of the trauma and her introvert nature stands in the path of her marriage even at the age of thirty-six. She thinks that as everyone in town is watching everything that happens, there is no chance for romance. In addition as a result of the sufferings the Japanese-Canadian experienced during the war time, she is not interested in marriage and motherhood. Being a mother only intensifies for Naomi probably the loss of her own mother and she equates this with a mythical reference. As Teruyo Ueki point out the mother figure is subsumed within an image of historical as well as mythical past references.

Further elaboration of this image of disappearance occurs through the following references or allusions: first, the Israelites who wandered the desert for forty years after Exodus from Egypt, which is suggested in the reference to manna; second, the image of “the suffering servant” described by Isaiah or the image of Christ taken to Golgotha … third, the destiny of the Indian tribes driven out of the Canadian prairie, which is evoked by the comparison of
Uncle Isamu to the Indian Chief, Sitting Bull (2), and by the story of Rough Lock Bill (144); and finally, the suffering of Naomi’s mother, who has perished under the atomic bomb and is enshrined in the folder which resembles Kannon’s shrine. (13)

Naomi feels discomfort to know about her community’s past. She wants to live in the present by forgetting and also by being ignorant about the sufferings faced by her family and her community. She is not interested in Aunt Emily’s journals and letters and keeps postponing reading them. Once, she learns regarding the discrimination faced by her community, it stands as a permanent wound in her heart. “The tension everywhere was not clear to me then and is not much clearer today. Time has solved few mysteries. War and rumors of wars, racial hatreds and fears are with us still” (77-78). The knowledge of her community’s sufferings and reading of Aunt Emily’s documents and conference papers generates a new spirit into her. The past incidents which she experiences make her silent and nervous. The comprehension of the past incidents enables her to gain strength and to face her problem of identity in a bold way. This point is substantiated by Grice when she points out,

The repeatedly enacted shift into the past in Naomi’s consciousness exemplifies the dominance of the past on both Naomi’s and Obasan’s present. Of all the characters in the text, it is these two who are least able to sever themselves from their past, and its psychological effects upon their present…Obasan’s time increasingly becomes past time as the novel progresses…. Likewise, the escalating frequency with which Naomi’s own thoughts become retrospective symbolically illuminates her awakening consciousness of both the importance of her cultural history and her desire for a return to her mother, who died at Nagasaki. (95)
This aspect is also revealed to the readers when she visits the coulee alone by wearing Aunt Emily’s coat. It may symbolically refer to Naomi’s following her Aunt Emily’s path. The reading shows that there is no definite cut between the past and present. The present incidents are continuations of the past. Incidents which occur in the life of Naomi in the contemporary time are the result of the experiences she faced in the past. She makes a statement “All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past” (25). This reading is important as Shirley Geok-lin Lim points out in “Japanese American Women’s Life Stories: Maternity in Monica Sone’s ‘Nisei Daughter’ and Joy Kogawa’s ‘Obasan’” that Naomi’s story is one of affirmation:

In its emphasis on the mother’s presence, constituted in her absence, Obasan continues Nisei Daughter’s reflections on the daughter/mother dyad. But where the (mother) text, Nisei Daughter, witnesses the erasure of the maternal/racial presence to allow the daughter to inhabit an ostensibly seamless, assimilative society, the following (daughter) text, Obasan, reinscribes the original presence. The daughter text recreates the Japanese mother, destroyed by a racist patriarchal system, which the elder Japanese American autobiography had hoped to leave behind. /With the discovery/recovery of the “Young Mother of Nagasaki,” the narrative voice finally becomes an affirmative voice. In the poetic voice, the speaking subject celebrates the most personal of human bonds, and it is this child-mother bond that then functions as the trope for the pubic bond of self and race. (309)

In Disappearing Moon Café, history is presented through the personal narrative rather than the non-personal/public narrative. Yet history is covered from the period of 1892 to late 1980s. This time frame is important as it traces the
role of the Chinese in the making of Canada. As Nicole Falkenhayner comments the bone-hunting activity of Gewi Chang is an “activity [that] points to both the history of Chinese Canadians and to a protest against the existing mainstream narrative of Canadian national identity” (38). Similarly the stress on 1924 in the novel is read as being significant for

1924 was the year of the boycott of the Chinese Canadian community against the possible passing of the so-called “Janet Smith” – bill: after a Chinese houseboy had had an affair with a fellow worker and killed her, there was a great public outrage and demands that Chinese should not be allowed to work with whites anymore. (39)

These instances of history can be read as being Lee’s attempt to integrate minority histories into the national one. This is substantiated when Nicole Falkenhayner states,

By connecting important times and places of her narrative with important instances in Chinese Canadian history, Lee simultaneously achieves an inscribing of her narrative into the historic Chinese Canadian narrative, an inscribing of Chinese Canadian experience into the national experience of Canada, and also a critique of the fact that this inscription has been denied Chinese Canadians for so long. (40)

Herewith from the angle of personal temporality, each one’s lifetime is portrayed before the readers. Through Kae’s mother, her uncle’s and her mother’s friend’s story, the past narrative is presented in the novel. She talks about Gewi Chang’s survival trouble in the new deserted land, Canada and through the passage of time, his successful life in the land is presented. Each character’s movement to Canada and their life experiences in the land are presented.
This novel gives the life histories of the four generations of the Wong family. Gewi Chang and Mui Lan belong to the first generation. Gewi Chang’s life is filled with sufferings and the suffocations and throughout his life he lives with pain in his heart. He is the first generation of the Wong family settled in Canada. When he works as a bone collector in the wild atmosphere, he meets Kelora, who becomes his first wife. When he meets her, he experiences a magical change within him. When she invites him to her home, he follows her as if he is in a magic spell and feels that “the barren wasteland around him had magically opened and allowed him admittance, he followed her through dense thickets, up hills and down through ravines, a respectable distance between them” (4). He feels his life in another world when he spends his time with Kelora – “When Kelora took him into the forests of “the hidden place”, another world opened up. She had a way of murmuring as they walked” (13).

After spending his life with Kelora for two years, Gewi Chang finds drastic difference exists between them. So he decides to leave her for China and marries a woman whom his mother selects. “He convinced himself that she had tricked him, and he willed himself to blot out those eyes of hers, already frightened and searching” (234-235). After his marriage with Mui Lan, whom his mother selected he always feels that he has committed a sin by marrying her. Throughout his life he lives by hurting himself through memories, “He was an old man now. And he played with his memories all day long. Or they played with him” (5). He does not show any affection towards his wife, Mui Lan and their son Choi Fuk:

They stood together as husband and wife but they weren’t close. Too many years apart after a brief marriage ceremony in the village between two shy, shuffling strangers who saw more of their new shoes than each other’s faces. After six months, the Gold
Mountain guest was gone, and she was pregnant. The next time she saw him, they were both too old to start again. (27)

When Gewi Chang gets to know that Ting An is his son from his first wife Kelora, he appoints Ting An as a worker, in his café, in order to torment himself by his presence. He is pained to tell Ting An that “he was his father”; and “that he had abandoned the woman who was his mother” (220). As days rolled by Gewi Chang also realizes that “whenever he looked at Ting An, he never saw a son, only a sore reminder that she was gone, and may be he just kept Ting An around to torture himself”(220). In his self pity he does not notice “the hurt on Ting An’s face, and the knots of anger that hardened around the hurt, year after year” (220).

By taking care of Ting An, he tries to find solace for his grief, but when he reveals Ting An regarding his fatherhood, Ting An rejects his fatherly affection with fury. Gewi Chang lives a torturing life due to his mistake. He is unable to find peace throughout his life after leaving Kelora. He admits that by mentioning, “Your spirit was fragile after all, when all along it seemed so strong! Ever since I’ve lived a miserable life, grieving for your loss, bitterly paying” (235). Throughout his life, Gewi Chang searches for peace which he could not find till his death. Due to his bitterness and disgruntled behavior, Mui Lan becomes a stone-faced, hard woman. Mui Lan, wife of Gewi Chang also changes due to the lonely Canadian atmosphere.

Mui Lan’s nightmare was loneliness. She arrived and found only silence. A stone silence that tripped her up when she tried to reach out. Gold Mountain men were like stone. She looked around for women to tell her what was happening, but there were none. By herself, she lacked the means to know what to do next. Without her society of women, Mui Lan lost substance. Over the years, she became bodiless, or was it soulless, and the only way she could
come back was by being noisy and demanding – because if nothing else, she was still the boss’s wife, wasn’t she? (26)

During her initial stage of settlement in Canada, she has several dreams about her relationship with her husband but she is greatly disappointed—“Frankly, even after twenty-eight years of a marriage as hollow as hers, Mui Lan felt she should know a better man than she did him. However, no fancy wedding bow, no matter how long the ribbon, could stretch over both decades and oceans” (27-28). She realized that she was just the mother of Gewi Chang’s only son. She understood that she relied on her husband for her identity. “A wife in name only, she relied heavily on him for her identity in this land, even though the hard distance reminded on her husband’s face. And this she could only bear in silence” (28). Her lonely life makes her to be interested in two things: money and her son, Choi Fuk. In the beginning Mui Lan is close with Ting An and she treats both boys as her own. But later when she finds her husband is closer to Ting An than with their son Choi Fuk, it makes her restless. She advises her son to take over the family business, – “you must learn to be your father’s right-hand man. A Ting is just a nameless nobody who’s been trying to get in good with your father” (35).

Fong Mei’s life is similar to Gewi Chang and Mui Lan’s, as there is no peace in her life too. When Fong Mei marries Choi Fuk and comes to Canada, she suffers due to loneliness. Her alienation is explained when she states “I’m lost among strangers, with ‘no road and no destination’. There is no one to turn to, and I think of home constantly. I’ve forgotten why I ever wanted to come to this forsaken place…There I’ve cried my unhappiness out” (44). During her initial stay in Canada, she wonders at every facility people have at home, but her permanent living in Canada makes her to forget these wonders and due to her misery she becomes an aggressive woman.
In the case of Mui Lan, her relationship with her husband changes her attitude towards others. When she finds that her daughter-in-law, Fong Mei could not produce any issue to the Wong family, she becomes aggressive and mean. Through her harsh manner and words, she makes Fong Mei to accept her deal of sending her son to a waitress in order to produce issues to the Wong family: ‘All you need to do is give up your old man for a few days, and soon you’ll have a son – and with him, security, prestige, honor, and the glowing warmth of a family to look after your old age. What could be easier? And where’s the harm in that?’ She asked innocently’ (62). Her behavior with Fong Mei changes Fong Mei’s life and it results in the suffering faced by her family over the next two generations. During her old age, Mui Lan finds herself powerless and suffers under the control of Fong Mei.

Fong Mei finds no affection from her mother-in-law and her husband and no solace in the new land. In such loneliness she finds Ting An’s relationship as a precious thing. Ting An can notice these changes in her:

He had watched her play the role of the perfect daughter-in-law all along, always eager to please, to work tirelessly, never bitter, so it was easy for him to see her gradually abandon the once very bright, very genuine zeal for her new married life. A bit more every year, until nothing was left in her eyes but solitude. (53)

She accepts her mother-in-law’s idea of sending her husband to a waitress for the birth of a baby. Initially, she finds it hard to accept and shows her hatred towards her husband. Slowly she comes out of this frustrated feeling and tries to find peace in solitude: “She should stop harassing her husband! What was the use of being so vindictive! She certainly wasn’t angry at him any more. And his sleeping with the waitress didn’t gnaw at her pride as it had before” (91). She feels giving birth to a child will make her whole again and she longs for it. In order to take revenge against her family members and also to escape from her aloofness, she
decides to have intimate relationship with Ting An. When Ting An is ready to accept her as his wife, she finds ecstasy in her relationship with him. “She, who’d been abandoned for so long; she clamped down on his hand, because she desperately needed his touch to release the pent-up intimacy within her” (183-184). It results in the birth of her three children. Even though Ting An desires to marry her, she finally rejects his proposal and her relationship with him comes to an end. When she gives birth to a child and her mother-in-law’s harassment comes to an end and she takes control of her house. But she still, does not find any peace in her life. She hates Canada and considers that country as the reason for her suffering.

Beatrice’s mother hated this pious town, which kept her bored and laboring like a poor woman. After Ting An had finally ejected her from the last bleeding shreds of his heart, she hated him too. She hated her marriage, and her mother-in-law especially. She longed to leave them all and go back home. (164)

Even with her children she could not beget any happiness. When her daughters, Beatrice and Suzanne decide to marry Keeman and Morgan respectively, she loses her temper. She alone knows that Suzanne is Morgan’s half-sister. In order to stop that incestuous marriage, she gets Morgan arrested by the police and sends Suzanne to prison. As a result of such events, she slowly begins to lose her daughters’ affection too. When Fong Mei was in China, she spent her days in ecstasy and once she is in Canada, she loses her happiness and lives a painful life.

Ting An, the son of Kelora and Gewi Chang also wanders throughout the novel without peace. Without knowing his father’s identity, he spends his childhood with his grandfather. When he becomes an orphan he lives with Gewi Chang and Mui Lan, and initially he spends his life happily in their affection.
Later on, the sudden change in Mui Lan’s affection towards him affects him deeply. When Fong Mei shows concern towards him, he decides to do whatever she needs and it leads to his relationship with her. When he proposes to her, Fong Mei rejects his wish. Due to that depression he marries a French-Canadian lady, with whom he shares no intimacy. He finds no closeness with his wife and son Morgan. Suzanne narrates about Morgan and his mother’s hatred towards Ting An to Beatrice, “Morgan said that his father was dead. When did he die, I asked, but Morgan refused to talk about his father. And the strange way he said “dead” made me wonder if he had even lived” (172-173). Throughout Ting An’s life he lives as a shadow without love from anyone.

Ting An being an orphan didn’t have a secure enough framework to cordially absorb rejection, filling it away under the you-can’t-win-em-all category of his memories. He suffered disproportionately. Not that the unsatisfying affair left him despondent – nothing as melodramatic as all that. It merely left him without a leg to stand on, so to speak. No protection whatsoever, except for the true grit Ting An rubbed on like exterior paint, year after year. (184)

The third generation of the Wong family too, suffers due to the family curse. Beatrice’s love for Keeman is not accepted by her mother initially as she assumes that he is Beatrice’s half brother. However, she later learns that Keeman is not the son of the waitress by her husband Choy Fuk, and she slowly accepts their marriage. Suzanne’s relationship with Morgan results in a pregnancy which terrifies Fong Mei and she breaks their relationship. Suzanne gives birth to a child prematurely, which dies during its birth and then Suzanne too dies by committing suicide. Morgan suffers throughout his life without finding peace. The third generation which is presented in this novel suffers due to these disastrous love affairs.
The fourth generation of the Wong family finds happiness only from Kae’s life. As the only daughter of Beatrice and Keeman, Kae leads a free, independent and prosperous life. She hears the story of her ancestors through her mother, her mother’s friend Chi and her uncle Morgan which makes her to author a novel. She thinks that with her, the curse of her family had ended. Kae, the narrator of the novel in the contemporary time delivers a child. Her mother Beatrice, who takes care of Kae tells her family history to her daughter. Herewith, one can just go to the conjecture made by Donald C. Goellnicht in “Of Bones and Suicide: SKY Lee’s Disappearing Moon Café and Fae Myenne Ng's Bone”. He feels that the Chinese Canadian culture is given a problematic reading as he mentions: “What is especially disturbing about Lee’s novel is that, after this interracial relationship, there is no sense of a successfully negotiated hybridity” (314). Kae knows her ancestors’ history at the age of thirty six, as her mother had not told her about it earlier. To Kae, the illicit history of her ancestors seems like a curse and it enables her to understand the sufferings her ancestors faced. The past history of her ancestors’ enables her to sense that the curse of her ancestors’ affects her too. Kae states,

It took quite the sentimental occasion for my mother to finally loosen a little of her iron grip on her emotions in order to reveal a little of her past that she thought so shameful—the same past that has shaped so much of my own life, with evil tentacles that could have even wormed into the innocent, tender parts of my baby. (23)

The knowing of the past history of her ancestors helps her to feel that the curse is redeemed in her generation. Kae tells Chi, her mother’s friend, “Look at my horizon, Chi. Not a cloud in sight. The sky’s the limit. I am free. Isn’t that how the prophecy goes? After three generations of struggle, the daughters are free!” (209). It indicates that the past life of her ancestors affects the contemporary time. Here too there is no clear cut distinction between the past and the present and both
are interconnected. Till Kae knows her ancestors’ history she feels that her life was affected by their history and knowing of their lives enables her to come out of it. One can find that in this way ‘Historical Inversion’ happens in this novel. Donald C. Goellnicht further thinks that the novel works to oppose cultural assimilation:

Chinese Canadian culture in Vancouver during the first half of the twentieth century is depicted as being so obsessed with its own preservation in the face of constant racist attacks by the state and the white population that it becomes focused almost exclusively on maintaining what it believes to be “authentic” Chineseness. In this misguided attempt to cling to racial purity – itself a form of racism bred in response to dominant-culture hegemony, where by Chinese Canadians grow to feel superior to First Nations Peoples within these racist hierarchies of power – the Wong family ends up rejecting Wong Ting An and his son Morgan Wong, the “mixed-blood” descendents of Kelora Chen. (314)

The non-personal aspect presented in the novel is only through the narration of Janet Smith’s murder case. A Scottish nurse maid, Janet Smith was murdered and a China man, Wong Foon Sing was suspected as a victim in 1924. It results in more political problems for the Chinese community. At this situation, when this murder occurred, the whole Chinese community faced much more discrimination.

Already, the law forbade Chinese men from certain kinds of employment if it meant that white women would have to work in close proximity to them. The Janet Smith bill was proposed as an extension of this law. At this critical time, such a proposal not only blatantly implied that Wong Foon Sing had murdered the girl but made criminal suspects of all Chinese men. (224)
This incident proves the minority position of the Chinese community in Canada

The personal history in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is presented through the writings of LuLing to Ruth as well as Precious Auntie to LuLing. Precious Auntie is the mother of LuLing, whose personal history is filled with desire for independence and superstitious beliefs. Precious Auntie is described by Mr. Tang, translator of LuLing’s life story as, ‘‘She was unusual’… ‘Self-educated, forth right, quite a rebel for her time’’ (299). She is presented as a woman who has ‘no name’ and in her later stage she has ‘no voice’. Precious Auntie lived during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Her personal temporality helps the readers to understand the tradition of China of her time. The older China is a patriarchal one, wherein women are expected to be submissive. But Precious Auntie is against all these notions and due to her education and independent thinking; she is made to suffer by her society.

Precious Auntie is educated and helps her father in bone setting and she has her freedom to select her own husband. When the coffin maker Chang proposes her for marriage, she rejects him by saying, “You asked me to be your concubine, a servant to your wife. I’m not interested in being a slave in a feudal marriage” (171). She decides to marry Hu Sen who is addressed as Baby Uncle by LuLing. Till this time she leads a comfortable and independent life. On the day of her marriage due to Chang’s plan her whole life changes. She loses her husband and father on the same day.

“This is a curse,” she murmured, as she stared down at the bodies of the men she loved. For three sleepless days after their deaths, Precious Auntie apologized to the corpses of her father and Baby Uncle. She talked to their still faces. She touched their mouths, though this was forbidden and caused the women of the house to
fear that the wronged ghosts might either possess her or decide to stay. (174)
Unable to bear the suffering, she tries to commit suicide by burning herself. Due to it she loses her beauty and voice and yet even after losing her voice she does not keep quiet. She speaks through gestures. LuLing states:

She had no voice, just gasps and wheezes, the snorts of a ragged wind. She told me things with grimaces and groans, dancing eyebrows and darting eyes. She wrote about the world on my carry-around chalkboard. She also made pictures with her blackened hands. Hand-talk, face-talk, and chalk-talk were the languages I grew up with, soundless and strong. (2)

She lives for the sake of her daughter LuLing. She teaches her to read and write and takes care of her. When LuLing could not understand her mother’s love and rejects her often, Precious Auntie becomes upset. Her belief in curses and ghosts is presented in an incident where she tells LuLing about her dream, “A ghost will then come and take us and our miserable bones with it. Then we’ll have to wear the weight of those million ingots around our dead necks to bribe our way through hell” (179). Through this kind of teaching she makes LuLing also to have belief in ghosts and curses.

Precious Auntie’s personal history is also filled with her love for her daughter. LuLing is the reason for her life. She says, “Sometimes I wish I were already dead. I wanted to die, really I did, but I came back for you” (179). When LuLing’s marriage is arranged by her family members to Chang’s son, Precious Auntie opposes it. This incident creates a big gap between LuLing and her. In order to save her daughter’s life, she kills herself.

In the narration of LuLing, the changes which the Chinese society undergoes due to the passage of time are portrayed. LuLing lives in the twentieth
century, where her society has undergone several changes. LuLing gets education at home and works as a calligrapher in the later part of her life. The period in which LuLing’s grows up is more liberal and less restrictive than the time frame of Precious Auntie’s time. She is allowed by her husband and father-in-law to work in the orphanage even after her marriage. She is encouraged by them to learn several things. After her husband’s death, due to her father-in-law’s advice she goes to the US. In several ways, LuLing lives an independent life when compared with her mother. It shows the changes the society undergoes in time. Among the three generation women namely, Precious Auntie, LuLing and Ruth, Ruth lives a more free and independent life. It is possible in her life not only due to the change in time but also in space. In the US she lives a very comfortable life by not bothering about her society.

Like Precious Auntie, LuLing too faces several troubles and sufferings in her life. During her childhood days, she lives a comfortable life with her family members as Precious Auntie lived. She is very good in her studies. She herself tells about her knowledge, “I was only six then, but very smart. I could count. I could read. I had a memory for everything…” (1). She passed her days with various imaginary stories of Precious Auntie. Even though she lives a comfortable life often she feels jealous of GaoLing due to GaoLing’s close relationship with her mother. “I was often jealous when GaoLing received more attention from the mother we shared. I still believed I was the eldest daughter. I was smarter. I had done better in school. Yet GaoLing always had the honor of sitting next to mother, of sleeping in her k’ang…” (180). Later on, she mentions that in her mother’s eyes, she had no charms.

To her ears, my words had no music. It did not matter how obedient I was, how humble or clean. Nothing I did satisfied her. I became confused as to what I must do to please her. I was like a
turtle lying on its back, struggling to know why the world was upside down. (181)

LuLing has several superstitious beliefs like her mother Precious Auntie. Her world is filled with curses and ghosts. Ruth thinks that for, “her mother, just about anything was a sign of ghosts: broken bowls, barking dogs, phone calls with only silence or heavy breathing at the other end” (10). She believes that the curse which her family has is the reason for her sufferings. When she mentions about the curse to her first husband Kai Jing he tries to eradicate her superstitious beliefs by telling her that everything is a made-up story. “There are no such things as curses,” Kai Jing later told me. “Those are superstitions, and a superstition is a needless fear. The only curses are worries that you can’t get rid of” (258). She believes his words and enjoys her life by forgetting about curses. When her husband dies and when she suffers due to her survival problems, she again begins to have belief on those things. According to LuLing, “the world was against her and no one could change this, because this was a curse” (44).

LuLing, after her husband’s death begins to work in Hong Kong to earn money for her voyage to the US. Even in the US her sufferings are not over. When her second husband dies after two years of their married life, her sufferings begin again. She works hard to live a comfortable life with her daughter. Throughout her life she suffers for one or the other reasons. Ruth’s American way of living affects LuLing and it causes misunderstandings between them. Her sufferings mould her as a different person and as a person who could not find peace in anything. Ruth complains that her mother “was permanently unhappy with everything and everybody” (16). Due to her sufferable experiences LuLing becomes indifferent to everyone.

Ruth’s personal history is filled with worries and anxieties about everything. Ruth’s personal history represents the misunderstandings and
problems faced by the first and second generations of the diasporic community especially between mother and daughter. She represents the second generation of the Chinese community in America and she follows American culture. Through her mother’s teaching and practices she follows Chinese culture but considers herself as an American. During her young age, the double identity of a Chinese and American cause her much trouble. She follows the tradition of Chinese culture and invites her relatives and friends for the Full Moon Festival. Her ordering of both American and Chinese food for the dinner shows her way of following both cultures. She does not want to make others uncomfortable due to her way of following Chinese culture. This makes her to be more conscious of her and also of her mother’s behavior in public. She feels uncomfortable when her mother behaves in a Chinese way. Ruth, “had resented LuLing’s speaking Chinese in front of others, knowing they couldn’t understand the covert remarks. ‘Look how fat that lady is...’” (68). Even though she follows certain practices from Chinese tradition, she depicts herself as an American. Ruth reminiscences about using fingers as a memory device, she says that she had learnt this Chinese style from her mother, but she uses it in the American way.

Ruth could still picture her mother counting in the Chinese style, pointing first to her baby finger and bending each finger down to her palm, a motion that Ruth took to mean that all other possibilities and escape routes were closed. Ruth kept her own fingers open and splayed, American style. (19)

In school, when her friends find that her mother is Chinese, she does not wish to accept the truth, as she is ashamed of the outlook of her friends’ towards her mother. She reminiscences, “Some of the other first-graders were laughing down below. ‘Is that your mother?’ they shouted. ‘What’s that gobbledy-gook-gook she’s saying?’/ ‘She’s not my mother!’ Ruth shouted back. ‘I don’t know who she is!’” (69). When she grows up several conflicts arise between Ruth and
her mother LuLing due to the cultural clash – “[Ruth] knew what it meant to feel like an outsider, because she had often been one as a child” (59). Ruth goes with her friends for outing, smokes at her room and expects privacy in everything. When her mother interferes in these things she could not tolerate, and shouts at her mother in anger, “‘I’m an American,’ Ruth shouted. ‘I have a right to privacy, to pursue my own happiness’” (140). This creates a big gap between them.

Due to these cultural clashes and her mother’s unhappiness, Ruth always underestimates her. Once in her school, her professor asks her to grade them. She gives ‘B’ grade for herself whereas others have given themselves ‘A’. She feels uncomfortable with everyone at some point. During her childhood, she hates to be with her mother and sometimes tries to hurt her mother’s feeling. Once in order to hurt her mother, Ruth writes in her diary – “I hate her! She’s the worst mother a person could have. She doesn’t love me. She doesn’t listen to me. She doesn’t understand anything about me. All she does is pick on me, get mad, and make me feel worse” (141).

The novel, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* concentrates more on the Chinese history than about the Chinese experiences or their position in the US. In the narration of LuLing, several historical incidents which took place in China are narrated. There is a mention about the opposition between the Nationalists and the Communists. Later this opposition comes to an end when the Japanese fights against the Chinese. The war against China by Japan and its effect is portrayed in this novel.

When the war is announced, people in the orphanage home where LuLing stays feel safe, because it is run by American missionaries. They believe that the Japanese will not attack the American since the war is between China and Japan. In a conversation with LuLing, Sister Yu mentions that as the school is run by Americans
and since the Americans are neutral towards the Japanese there is no question of which side it is. (252)

During the war, atrocities carried out by the Japanese soldiers in China are mentioned: “The Japanese had become angry that the Communists were hiding in the hills. They wanted to draw them out by slaughtering people in the nearby villages…the Japanese were doing unspeakable acts with innocent girls, some as young as eleven or twelve” (271). In the process of war, China begins to lose its soldiers and the stronger position of Japanese is delineated in the novel.

When winter came, we heard that many of the Communist soldiers were falling sick and dying of diseases before they had a chance to fire a single bullet. The Japanese had more medicine, warmer clothes, and they took food and supplies from whatever villages they occupied. With fewer Communist troops to defend the hills, the Japanese were crawling up, and with each step, they chopped down trees so no one could hide and escape. (261)

When the Chinese troop begins to lose its soldiers, they forcibly include the Chinese citizens as soldiers. In this way, LuLing’s first husband Kai Jing is taken by the Chinese soldiers. As a soldier tells Kai Jing, it was not a request but a requirement. “Your village owes us this. We order you. If you don’t come along as patriots, we’ll take you as cowards” (264). The Japanese-Americans encounter is mentioned in the novel. This war affects the lives of many people in China too.

Yet another kind of historical tracing in the novel is regarding the difficulty of getting visa to enter America, after the Chinese Exclusion Act. This difficulty is mentioned through GaoLing’s letter to LuLing, “The quota for Chinese, however, is very low, and the number who want to get in is beyond count” (284-285). In these ways the history of China and the war of Japan on China and its effects are presented in a vivid manner.
In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Ruth works as a ‘Ghost writer’ in the contemporary time. Ruth’s mother LuLing is poor in using English. Due to this lacuna during her young age Ruth works as an interpreter for her mother, “Being the only child of a widow, Ruth had always been forced to serve as LuLing’s mouthpiece. By the time she was ten, Ruth was the English-speaking “Mrs. Luling Young” on the telephone, the one who made appointments for the doctor, who wrote letters to the bank” (45). Some times Ruth thinks that these past experiences might have made her as a book doctor in the present. Ruth’s past life becomes responsible for her pessimistic attitude towards her life in the existing time. In the contemporary time, she lives with Art, her American partner with her two step daughters. Even with Art she feels uncomfortable. She often suspects whether he really loves her or not. During Full Moon Festival, Art’s conversation with his first wife Miriam makes Ruth to be uncomfortable. She feels that, “Miriam would be a reminder that the past was not always good and future was uncertain” (83). She suspects Art whether he will consider about her mother’s health and take care of her. Ruth is continuously surrounded with so many fears and doubts about everything.

Since the Full Moon Festival dinner, she had become more aware of the way she and Art failed to be a family. She had tried to push this out of her mind, but it crept back, confirming to her that it was not an unnecessary worry. Why did she feel she didn’t belong to anyone? Did she unconsciously choose to love people who kept their distance? Was she like her mother, destined to be unhappy? (99)

Once Art’s daughter Fia, complains that Ruth, “loves to make everything *sooo difficult*” (22). Her friend Wendy advices her to, “Stop being such a worrywort” (32). Her break up with her first boy friend is also due to it.
The identity problems which she earlier faced as well as the one she faces and the problematic relationship with her mother show her as a silent worrier. Ruth, although, born and brought up in the US, is made to practice Chinese culture at home by her mother. Due to this cultural clash which she faces, she becomes subdued in school as well as at home. It results in her invisibility in school. She feels ashamed of her mother who does not speak English in front of her classmates. Her mother’s rejection of outing, friendship with boys, smoking, etc creates a big gap between the relationship of mother and daughter. In the contemporary time after reading her mother’s life’s incidents she changes her attitudes.

Ruth believes that the spirit of her grandmother and her mother’s love shapes her life. She remembers her life as different from her mother’s and grandmother’s and believes that it is may be due to their guidance. By looking at their photos she thinks,

These are the women who shaped her life, who are in her bones. They caused her to question whether the order and disorder of her life were due to fate or luck, self-determination or the actions of others. They taught her to worry. But she has also learned that these warnings were passed down, not simply to scare her, but to force her to avoid their footsteps, to hope for something better. They wanted her to get rid of the curses. (352)

As Xiumei Pu reads in the unpublished project,

The novel is Ruth’s story but also her mother’s and grandmother’s. All of them are rebellious women though in different forms and in the backdrop of different historical and cultural contexts, her grandmother is in old feudalist China, her mother partly in China and partly in America, she in America. All of them are silenced in similar and different ways. All of them are womanists in the sense
that they are audacious self-definers, who follow spirituality in their quest for reclaiming the silenced female voice. (48)

This also displays a sense of bonding among the women. In this novel too the contemporary time is shaped by the past. The past occurrences take responsibility for the present happenings and in such a way ‘Historical Inversion’ occurs in this novel.

**Spatial Factors:**
Spatial references are not given much importance and only discussion of this is with reference to geographical boundaries and topography of the land. In *Obasan*, *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* since the narratives come from the second and third generation diasporic characters, the anguish of moving across border and aspects of dislocation are less in the narratives. One of the best illustrations of this is assimilation of the lands in the beginning of *Obasan*. The references in *Obasan* is to the regions of Naomi’s and her family’s existence. The novel, *Obasan* is located in one of the towns of Alberta. When Naomi remembers her childhood days, the location also changes accordingly to British Columbia and then to Slocan. Moreover, *Obasan* also discusses some aspects of physical space. Remarking on the spatial aspects, Grice mentions “Naomi’s awareness of personal space means that she often registers the presence or the absence of other family members in spatial terms…. When her father dies, she notes his absence symbolically by the simultaneous disappearance of her pet frog from his space…” (104). In *Disappearing Moon Café*, geographical space in the prologue is presented as wild and cool. The presentation of space symbolically shows the hardship, the Chinese community faces among the Canadians. Gewi Chang, in his young age, works as a bone collector. He collects bones of his community people and helps to send it to their home country for proper burial, according to their culture. When he worked as a bone collector he wandered through the wild land which makes his survival itself a big problem.
The immigrants from China in their initial stage consider the land as barren and isolated place. It makes the immigrants feel lonely and results in psychological problems for them. The novel *Disappearing Moon Café* takes place in the Chinatown, where the Chinese community lives by creating a China for themselves within Canada. They begin to love it as their own country and when time passes they could not imagine themselves as separate from that geographical location of the Chinatown: “More and more memories of the old villages had faded into a vague distance, too far to retrace now. And their roots had sunk deeper in this land, so deep that to pull up stakes would mean death” (71).

The novel, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is located in two nations. In the present narration the story is located in San Francisco, America, where Ruth lives with Art. Changes in the location show the changes in the life of the characters. The novel also pictures different places from China when it narrates the life of LuLing and Precious Auntie. Most of the locations, except Hong Kong and Peking, have the English translated name for the Chinese one. From GaoLing’s conversation with Ruth, readers can understand that English translations are used in the novel for referring to different locations. The study shows that unlike the temporal factors, spatial elements play lesser role in the three novels namely *Obasan*, *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. As mentioned earlier, it may be because the three novels center on the second, third or fourth generation of the diasporic community, for whom the experience of moving away from the homeland is unavailable.

The present reading proves how the diasporic communities are restricted by the majority community. The reading enables to understand that from the past to the present, the diasporic communities are in some way or the other discriminated by the settled society. Almost all the diasporic community suffer
due to their identity problem but each and every character in the select novels face different kinds of problems and identity crisis in their lives. The study shows that the diasporic characters in the select three novels produce or reproduce various identities in the settled society. At another reading the problematic of culture can also be read as an attempt to read a new national culture. The three women writers, Kogawa, Lee and Tan stress the multicultural nature of the settled lands. By a reading of Obasan and Disappearing Moon Café Nicole Falkenhayner points out, “this attempt at plurality has proved successful at least in the creation of art which discusses further the complex issues of identity and plurality, can be seen by the large output of Canadian literature assessing the plurality of the countries past, and the manifold myths and histories that stem from this plurality” (61). This aspect could be quite true for an understanding of The Bonesetter’s Daughter too as it is set against the cultural pluralism of the US.