INTRODUCTION

It was essentially a desire to explore literary works and exchange thoughts, views and observations with people that eventually led me to decide on a career in teaching. The positive side of which was the terrific opportunities it could give to traverse new areas of study and it was in pursuit of this that I attended a workshop on ‘Learning Canada’ at Jadavpur University in the year 2007, that proved to be a major ‘turning point’ in my life. A fascinating world opened before me and I was left overwhelmed with the awesome diversity in Canadian culture, history, geography and literature. Canadian literature was not entirely new to me as I was already acquainted with some writings of Sui Sin Far (1865-1914), writer of European-Asian origin who lived in Canada and the U.S.A. but the magnificent spaces that now opened up before me left me yearning to know more about this splendid land that Kipling so aptly called ‘Our lady of the snows’.

A chance reading of Kogawa’s Obasan (1981) electrified me. This was followed by explorations of texts by Canadians of Chinese as also Japanese ancestry. Though of a common Asian origin, I observed both a similarity as well as a marked difference in the approaches and experiences of the two races which gave an impetus to the idea of a comparative study of their literatures. As a nation of immigrants, Canada has a splendid variety of literatures all of which contribute to the making of its colourful literary mosaic. What drew my curiosity was the fact that the pioneering efforts of the Chinese and Japanese people were largely disregarded by Canadian society and literature seemed to speak out loud and refused to remain suppressed.
The idea of looking at Canada from the perspective of the white writers alone did not appeal much to me and I chose instead to take up works that presented a picture of the country and its people from the point of view of the marginalised, the fringe people or the minority as I myself would have been were I to step on this fascinating land.

Canada presents a complex picture with its diversity in language, culture, landscape and literature. The popular concept of Canada as a multicultural nation embracing people of all races is perhaps more complex than it appears. In 1971 Canada adopted the policy of Multiculturalism. If Multiculturalism is the acceptance of many cultures then the concept of a minority literature or literature of the marginalised becomes a notion to challenge as all the cultures contribute towards a multicultural Canada. The concept and the very entity of Canada as a multicultural nation becomes diluted if any one of its cultures is disregarded; as all the cultures together contribute towards the making of a pan Canadian culture. It is the richness and abundance of Canada’s languages, cultures and peoples that make it a multicultural nation. Where then does the idea of a minority people or a marginal people or their literatures arise?

Peter S. Li says in his essay on Race And Ethnicity that ‘Thus in Canada, the British and the French enjoy the secured status of the two founding peoples whose languages became Canada’s official languages in 1969 (Statutes of Canada 1969), while others (mainly non-British and non-French Europeans at first and later immigrants of other origins) are seen as ‘cultural groups’ that contribute to the making of a multicultural society.’ (3) Canadian history is the history of the struggle of the English and the French over the supremacy of the Canadian land. After a long strife both the races established their authority over large areas and asserted the validity of their languages. With the gradual infiltration of people from other countries a more
heterogeneous and mixed population evolved. The English and the French remained the
dominant forces but the slow change in the character and composition of the population
paved the way for a multicultural society that later adopted a multicultural policy.

Apart from the English and the French, Canadian demographics show that the
Italians, Spaniards and other Europeans came to Canada. Asians like the Chinese, the
Japanese, Indians, Fijians etc also came in good number. The presence of so many
different races was also indicative of clashes and conflicts among them. With the
passage of time the different communities or Diasporas settled down and built their own
ghettoes and townships. They tried to assert their cultural individuality and at the same
time gain acceptance in Canadian society. This duality will in fact become a reality of
Canada’s ‘cultural groups’. Himani Bannerji rightly says in The Dark Side of the Nation
that:

The irony compounds when one discovers that all white people, no matter when
they immigrate to Canada or as carriers of which European ethnicity, become
invisible and hold dual membership in Canada, while others remain immigrants
generations later (112).

It becomes doubly difficult for the non white migrant then to establish his identity in
Canada and loyalty for the nation and at the same time retain and honour his own native
identity.

The focus of my study is the life and experiences of the Chinese and Japanese
communities in Canada as is evident from their writings. The interesting factor that
emerges from their works is the distinct character of their works despite the
commonality of their Asian origins and the fact that both races of people came with
similar motives and settled down in the same country. This remarkable feature inflamed
the desire to probe deeper into the history and socio-cultural life of the Chinese and the
Japanese in Canada and find out about their experiences and feelings as they battled and survived in a foreign land. The Chinese and Japanese have had surprisingly diverse experiences in Canada. Their histories as a Diaspora community in white society is replete with sensational events, confrontational relations and conflicting moments within their respective communities, with the world outside as also with each other.

My thesis will investigate the works of some Chinese and Japanese writers in Canada and will attempt to find how their writings have been shaped by their experiences, the policies of the government, the attitude of society towards them and above all how individual perspective, gender and generation all complicate the entire process of immigration and Diaspora life. Numerous tests, hurdles, challenges and trials dot the lives of both the Chinese and the Japanese in Canada. How these were overcome and the small Asian communities slowly expanded and made their presence felt and established their individual identities is apparent from their writings. Their writings also give a glimpse into worlds hitherto unknown as the lives of the Chinese and the Japanese in Canada could only be exposed to the world from their own writings based on their own personal experiences. It will also seek to break the myth that the experiences of the two communities was the same and will attempt to bring out the similarities and differences between their experiences as is evident from the works of the writers of the two communities. The methodology adopted by me is therefore essentially comparative in nature.

The thrust of my study then is to examine some of the literary works of the Chinese and Japanese in Canada and to make a comparative study of their experiences and their realities. In order to achieve this I have first discussed and analysed the history behind the emigration of the Chinese and Japanese from their native countries and their immigrant experiences in Canada the host land. I have then made a study of novels by
select writers from both the communities. The exercise involved the identification of certain key themes, common motifs and markers that enable the reader and critic to discern the uniqueness of their writings; subsequent to this, I have attempted to compare and contrast them from different perspectives. I have focussed primarily on the social and cultural life of the immigrants and the impact of Canadian policy and law making in moulding their lives.

The Chinese novelists that I have taken up are Wayson Choy (b 1939), Fred Wah (b 1939), Sky Lee (b 1952) and Judy Fong Bates (b 1949). Their works that I have taken up for study include The Jade Peony (1995) and All That Matters (2004) by Choy. Diamond Grill (1996), Disappearing Moon Café (1990) and Midnight at the Dragon Café (2004) by Wah, Lee and Fong Bates respectively.


The selection of the novelists is deliberate as they are writers who have each dealt with a particular aspect of Diaspora life and have through fictional representation recreated the space for resistance and survival. The novelists have through their lived experiences projected the history of their communities to the reader and have attempted the difficult task of making several hitherto unknown truths known. A reading of the novels reveals the interesting point that the experiences of each of the writers are different and hence the misconception of clubbing all Chinese and Japanese immigrants along with other immigrants as a homogenous group is indeed tragic. The Chinese writers and Japanese writers each write in a different style and their individual narrative
techniques and personal experiences are markedly different. My research I hope will help break this myth and lead to an appreciation of the works of the Chinese and Japanese writers for their individual contributions to Canadian literature.

The novel as a genre that I have selected is also relevant. The German poet and philosopher Novalis has said that novels arise due to the shortcomings of history\(^2\). History has been silent until fairly recently about the traumas suffered by the Chinese or Japanese in Canada. The internment of the Japanese after the fateful attack on Pearl Harbour has remained a dark chapter in Canada’s history. It was the combined effort of vigorous activism and profuse writing that helped the Chinese and Japanese communities in Canada elicit apology, compensation and Redress from the government. The novels written by these authors all appear to have an agenda whether intentional or not. They have a purpose to fulfil. Poetry, short story and the essay have also made a mark in the literary history of the Diaspora in Canada. Poetry in fact was written first in the native Chinese or Japanese languages to express the agony of the immigrant. I found the novel a suitable and interesting genre that gave a powerful reflection of Diaspora life in Canada. The novels selected are based on the personal experiences of the writers and carry a strong note of authenticity in their biographical value. The Diaspora literature that has emerged in Canada is as much a unique characteristic of Canadian literature as it is a natural consequence of Canadian life and society which accommodated so many varied races.

The diasporic novel interestingly develops as a sub genre of the novel and explores the realities of diasporic life. The novel with its wide canvas, elasticity and flexibility of form as well as fluidity of time frame skilfully adapts itself to convey the nuances of immigrant life. The Chinese and Japanese writers have effectively related their experiences and reflected issues close to their hearts through the medium of the
diasporic novel. Each writer has tried to develop his or her story by eliciting material from real life and weaving patterns that bring out the distinctiveness of individual and racial experience. Shain and Barth write, “We define diaspora as a people with a common origin who reside, more or less on a permanent basis outside the borders of their ethnic or religious homeland...” The dynamics of the diasporic novel is unique in that they address several issues related to their lived experiences in the host land, their relations with their native land, the conflicts that arise out of the process of negotiating with their multiple identities in an attempt to embrace many cultures. As a literary type, the novel offers the perfect platform to tackle these concerns and reproduce the emotional and sensitive responses of the different generations of the Diaspora at a time when it was sometimes impossible to articulate the same verbally or through any other media.

Japanese writer Joy Kogawa actually lived through the internment with her family in Slocan. Sakamoto’s parents and grandparents too lived in internment camps and in a conversation Sakamoto admits to the strangely hushed response to this terrifying episode in the lives of the Japanese Canadian.

No one talked about internment ------ not the history books at school and certainly not my parents at home... As I recall, I first learned about internment from reading something in a magazine, then I began to ask my parents questions that made them very uneasy. It was not until the redress movement --- the lobby to secure an apology and restitution from the government ---- gained momentum and public support that Japanese Canadians started to speak out.

Sakamoto’s personal efforts at organising meetings and participating in the movement for redress is reflected in The Electrical Field while the personal experiences of her parents and grandparents at the camp have helped her to speak about the consequences of internment life on later generations as is aptly evident in the book.
Their writings give a very complete picture of the internment and its effects on the Japanese Canadian community in Canada. However it may be remembered that the internment which largely affected the Issei and Nisei, first and second generations of the Japanese in Canada was not all that there was or is to the Japanese experience in Canada. The Sansei or third generation of Japanese immigrants and all the later generations may not have personally undergone its horrors but have inherited a sense of loss, of rootless-ness and of anxiety and uneasiness that has overshadowed their lives in some way or the other. Kogawa was a Nisei who lived through the internment along with her Issei parents and gives her perspective of the incidents and experiences of the Japanese Canadians. Sakamoto on the other hand heard the stories from her mother and grandparents who lived in camps and on the basis of their experiences she has built her story on the effects of the internment on a generation like hers that did not experience it but lived to bear its consequences not physically but psychologically and emotionally. Together Kogawa and Sakamoto recreate an authentic picture of the most challenging times of the Japanese in Canada.

Goto on the other hand who migrated to Canada at a very young age explores the lives of the Japanese in Canada from a completely different aspect. The ‘shin ijusha’ or New Immigrant who came to Canada from Japan was very different from the pioneering generation of the Issei. (Takata 168). They were more educated and refined and Japan too had undergone many changes in the intervening period. Goto came to Canada with her parents in 1969 and her novels reflect the lives of the Japanese in Canada from a different perspective. Her novels are testimony to the lives of the different generations of Japanese immigrants living in Canada and shaped by various factors causing generational clashes within the home and having to face a different kind
of confrontation outside it. Kogawa, Sakamoto and Goto together succeed in presenting the Japanese Canadian experience in almost perfect completeness!

The Chinese writers selected for my study too give a holistic and authentic picture of the Chinese experience in Canada and their writings throw up many issues that naturally lend themselves to further investigation and exploration. The books under consideration give a good overview of the ordeal of emigration from China and the arduous task of settling down in Canada and finding feet in new soil. The problems that arise out of immigration both within the unit of the family and the society at large are explored with skill and aplomb as the writers write from their lived experience in Canada. Fred Wah an author of mixed blood writes an autobiographical novel, Diamond Grill about his dilemma of being Chinese in a white society as also the dilemma of being white in appearance because of his mother and Chinese in culture due to his father’s upbringing in China. Choy, born in Vancouver describes the dynamics of relationships within a Chinese family, with white society and the relation with another Diaspora community, namely the Japanese. His response to the immigrant situation is both compelling and thought provoking and helps provide a more complete idea of the Chinese situation in Canada.

Lee and Fong Bates offer their own perspectives as their experiences are varied and their writings capture the subtle nuances of the Chinese experience in Canada through their stories. Lee was born in Canada but Fong Bates migrated at a young age as her protagonist Su-Jen in Midnight At The Dragon Cafe. Both give interesting insights into Chinese family relations, Chinese customs, condition of women back in China and Chinese immigrants in Canada in vivid strokes. The four writers in their attempts to present the Chinese experience in Canada provide valuable information in fictional mode. Chinese immigrant history, culture and social interactions, crises of
identity, the attitude of the dominant culture and the formidable face of Canadian Government policies all appear in their works.

The novels under study take a look at the experiences of the Chinese immigrants as they negotiate the serious business of balancing two cultures and living in the margins. Though seemingly very different, the books are tethered together by a marked sensitivity in their reflection of Chinese immigrant life in Canada. It is my contention that the Chinese immigrants’ woes in Canada stemmed partly from the rigidities of their own traditions but mostly from the Canadian Government’s policies which created conflicts within the community that were self-destructive and subversive. The writers seek to uphold the remarkable perseverance of the Chinese community even as formidable forces attempt to drag them down and pose challenges before them every day.

The Chinese were the only community in Canada who had to pay a Head Tax and suffered an Exclusion Act. They laid Canada’s rail lines braving many difficulties and died in huge numbers which were often not even reported (Wickberg 23). Chinese Canadian writers have captured the pathos of the early labourers and the miserable treatment they were subject to once their services in the railroads was over. History comes alive in the works of the Chinese writers as they reconstruct the stories of their community in Canada.

White Canadian writers like Northorp Frye, Susanna Moodie, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood or Robert Kroetsch to name only a few have celebrated Canada’s grand resources and her people and have also reflected the social consciousness, myth and fable of Canada as well as the harshness of nature and climate of Canada in their works. *The History of Emily Montague* by Frances Brooke published
in 1769 is credited as the first Canadian novel. Written in the epistolary technique it captures the author’s experience and observations of life in Quebec. Technically it may be viewed as a continuation of the tradition of 18th century English novel writing. These writers along with many others create a canon of what was widely considered to be ‘Canada’s mainstream writing’. The writers of diasporic fiction are, however, markedly different from the ‘mainstream writers’ and though they may actually find it hard to establish their Canadianness they definitely expose the Canadian reality to a very large extent.

The Diaspora writers have explored the problems of immigrant life through different narrative strategies. These have made the books remarkably variant in their approaches and styles and have offered the reader different perspectives of the immigrant experience in different ways. Since a narrative strategy is essentially a mode of communication, the content of the texts have influenced the strategies adopted by the writers. Kogawa has written on the experiences of internment life and after in Obasan, the book is essentially a long wait of the protagonist for her brother Stephen and Aunt Emily to come to her Aunt or Obasan’s house on the death of their uncle Isamu. As she waits memories come fleeting to her about the love of her uncle, his nature, her Japanese family in Canada, her fiery Aunt Emily, her childhood nightmares, her mother’s disappearance as also the life in Slocan and later at the farm in Alberta during the dispersal of Japanese immigrants at the end of the war. Memories awaken hurts and wounds. The reaction of the different members of the family to the entire horrifying experience of the internment and subsequent dispersal come alive to her. As different moments of her life arouse different emotions and revive lost memories in Naomi, the narrative structure flit backward and forward taking huge chronological leaps in order to accommodate Naomi’s feelings and remembrances. Kogawa gives the reader diary
entries, clippings from journals and newspapers to authenticate the situation and recreate the fear and sense of rootlessness that invaded the lives of the Japanese during the war years.

Sakamoto too dealt with the internment in *The Electrical Field* but her strategy was different. She creates a narrator in Asako who is the main protagonist as well as the person through whose words and actions the story of the book unfolds. Asako however is an ‘unreliable narrator’ who contradicts her own words and conceals facts and feelings. The reader therefore is compelled to discover hidden truths and find his way through the novel relying on his own instincts rather than simply following the narrator. The concept of the ‘unreliable narrator’ is novel as well as fascinating as it deepens the element of mystery in the book concerned as it is with the murder of a pretty Japanese woman and her White boss. Moreover the ‘unreliable’ character of the narrator underlines the traumatic effect of the internment on the Japanese who even in later years as in the case of Asako who never lived in the internment camp but continued to be affected by it and found it difficult to settle down to normal life.

In *One Hundred Million Hearts*, Sakamoto advances the story through the mind and movements of Miyo the young girl who sets out to learn the truth about her father a Kamikaze during the war. Her observations from the perspective of an immigrant are fascinating as she is a Japanese immigrant in Canada and an outsider in Japan despite her Japanese ancestry because of her birth and upbringing in Canada. This double marginalisation gives rise to complexities that Sakamoto handles with dexterity and gives truly varied shades to the immigrant experience. The question of multiple discriminations or marginalisation also arises in the lives of the Japanese immigrants in Canada as they face problems as minorities, as Asians, as minority women and so on.
Goto’s technique in *Chorus of Mushrooms* is admirable. She lets her characters tell their stories from their points of view and names the chapters after the three important women hailing from three different generations in her book. Their stories unfold not only their responses to the immigrant situation but also bring out the complexities in their internal relationships. Japanese myth, food, ritual and customs all find place in these narratives even as their protagonists seek to survive with dignity and preserve their identity.

The Chinese writers chosen for study too have employed interesting techniques to convey the Diaspora experience. Wah, Lee and Fong Bates have situated their stories against the backdrop of restaurants as all of them came from families that ran eating houses. The Chinese in Canada made much of their living by running restaurants and laundries as they found it difficult to find alternative means of livelihood after the Canadian Pacific Railway was built. Their business enterprises are a testimony to their organisational and entrepreneurial skills. While Lee and Fong Bates write in the third person narrative in a strong biographical vein, Wah’s account is autobiographical. The biographical note is seen in Kogawa and Sakamoto as well. That it was personal pain and deeply concealed secrets that gave the stimulus and the necessary push for writing these novels almost becomes an established truth on reading these novels.

Choy, who wrote *The Jade Peony* and *All That Matters* recounts in the third person an intricate saga of a Chinese family in Canada. The Chinese stories are all family stories much like the Japanese ones as ultimately they tell the stories of their writers or close members of their community. The writers write to tell their stories with many motives, to lay bare the truth or to recount the pain and agony long forgotten or suppressed by many or perhaps to sublimate their own feelings. Kogawa said in an interview to George Stroumboulopoulos in 2013:
‘If you stay stuck in the identity of the victim and if you therefore stay focused on how hurt you are, then you can do incredibly bad things to other people because you are not aware of their sufferings, you are only aware of yours.’

Several forces played upon the writers to tell their stories and in the process many truths tumble out in the interface between fact and fiction. The novels not only expose suppressed truths and hurts but also celebrate the spirit of these two races that endured so much to structure and establish themselves on foreign soil. Several important themes and issues emerge to bind the books into a magnificent unity along with strong undercurrents of trauma and anguish. Both the Chinese and the Japanese writers are caught in this strange dilemma where they seek to establish their own identities through their writings but at the same time desire to be accepted as part of the larger Canadian identity.

The matter is further rendered complex as the writers present a picture of their country and community as they understand it separated as they are physically by miles, oceans, mountains and several time zones and perhaps even psychologically if they are second or third generation migrants. Fong Bates left China at a very young age but visited it only later. Sakamoto was born in Canada and grew up the Canadian way like other children of her age. Yet the writers all wish to present their ideas of their native land and community through their experiences as immigrants in a foreign land. The perspective of the immigrant is unique. Living in wistful memory, remembering much and forgetting many he builds his own destiny.

I hope to look at the Chinese and Japanese immigrant situations in Canada from a completely impartial perspective. Many writers Chinese, Japanese, White or others have written on the Chinese and Japanese Diaspora in Canada. Should there be apprehensions of partiality on their part no such fears should arise in my study since as
an Indian I have tried to look at the situation from a completely objective viewpoint. For purposes of convenience I have decided to divide the chapters in a manner that brings out my objective of bringing out the similarities and differences of the experiences of the Chinese and the Japanese in Canada and facilitates a study of comparison and contrast. As the world becomes a smaller place every day and the movement of people from one place to another intensifies the chances of the intermingling of people and the creation of new races, a greater understanding among people and a better world can be imagined. But first the tests of endurance and fights for survival will have to take place.

The relevance of my study will take on a greater significance as I too am an Asian. To study about two other Asian races who have built community life in a distant cold country has fascinated me. There was a time when the Japanese migrated to Canada in large numbers, today Japan is herself a rich and powerful nation that is so technologically advanced that people are flocking to her and she is offering job opportunities to thousands of people. Canada has changed her policies over the years and changed her attitude to immigrants and has even adopted a Multicultural policy. As times change people and circumstances do too. There was a time when the Chinese had to pay a Head Tax to enter the country, today there are prominent Chinese citizens in Canada. The Chinese and Japanese are marrying whites and helping to create new identities and people with broader views.

I have attempted to look at the Chinese and Japanese situations in Canada from a historical and thematic approach. I have studied the histories behind the emigration of these races to Canada and have tried to trace the history of their stay in Canada through the works of selected writers. As my study progressed, I realized the growing thematic concerns of the texts and have attempted to analyse them from a thematic viewpoint with an emphasis on dominant issues that emerge on reading and analysis. Such an
approach has helped me to research and study the Chinese and Japanese immigrant situations in Canada from a meaningful perspective.

Thus the first chapter of my thesis will be on the History of the Chinese Immigration to Canada followed by Chinese immigrant writing in Canada. Chapter three will be on the History of Japanese immigration to Canada followed by a chapter on Japanese Canadian writing. The last chapter, i.e. Chapter Five will be a comparison between Chinese and Japanese writing in Canada.

I shall compare and contrast the situations and circumstances that led to the mass exodus of these Asian races to Canada. In short I will study the history behind their immigration and its reflection in the writings of the Chinese and Japanese Diaspora in Canada. Thereafter I shall explore their writings that speak of their experiences in the land of snows to find out the commonalities and differences in their experiences and the impact of their stay on the Canadian nation and on the communities themselves as they struggled, resisted, acquiesced and accommodated to both integrate into Canadian society as well as create their own identities. The Chinese and the Japanese have asserted their identities and presented themselves in a markedly different ways. Their works will reveal this and much more. The journey of discovering varied shades of their identities and experiences promises to be exciting and this is what I hope to undertake and explore.
ENDNOTES

1. Poem by Rudyard Kipling, *Our Lady of the Snows.*
   


