CHAPTER II

SOME REFLECTIONS ON CHINESE-CANADIAN WRITING

When Fong Mei says in *Disappearing Moon Café*, that Canada is ‘the land of fresh starts’ (253), we get an idea of what Chinese Canadian writing could be about. Chinese-Canadian works open up a world of hope, where people seek to build new lives, to start afresh and make a new beginning to heal old wounds, old problems and old ways of living. Like the Japanese after them and many other races, Asian, European or African, the Chinese came to Canada with hope and dreams, to start afresh and build a good life. ‘*Gum San*’, or the ‘gold mountain’, beckoned them and motivated them to leave home and hearth in pursuit of fortune and good life. The process involved risk and adventure, and there was bound to be crisis and conflict as a result of the displacement and dilemma suffered. Chinese Canadian writing tries to capture this and much more at various levels. It addresses the internal, the psychological, the social, the physical as also the historical aspect of Chinese life in Canada. Every writer writes from a perspective that is individualistic because each immigrant has a unique experience and a story that is his/her own.

The journey from far away China to the cold continent of the snows bears witness to the daunting spirit of the Chinese as a race. No doubt they were the first Asians to land in North America, the first Chinese who came to Canada were the ship builders who came around 1788 and then again the miners and adventurers who came around 1858 in search of gold.¹ No doubt the Chinese contributed hugely to Canadian development, but when it came to producing their own literature, to tell their own story.
of hope and dreams, of courage and fear, of betrayal and discrimination, of love and dejection, scandal and sensation, they were out done by the Japanese who came almost a hundred years later, but produced a generation of educated English speaking young men and women before them. Several factors were responsible for this which will be elaborated in this chapter.

It may be remembered that even before literature in English was produced by the Chinese, native Chinese writing appeared, to give expression to the Chinese experience in Canada. The earliest evidence of Chinese writing is probably the wall poems found on the detention centre in Victoria, British Columbia.\(^2\) They are similar to the anonymous ‘Gold Mountain Poems’ discovered in the U.S.A. which were composed by the earliest Chinese immigrants to America and were edited several generations later by Marlon.K.Hom and published by the University of California Press. They express mostly the ‘hardship and discrimination’ faced by the immigrants on arrival in America (Rico and Mano 259).

Chinese Canadian writers who are the children of either the first or second generation of immigrants have recorded quite faithfully what hardships their ancestors went through and have drawn an interesting picture of contemporary life. In other words they give us a fictional form of history which throws open many unknown aspects of immigrant life, not only the struggles of the minority community against the larger white one but also the internal factions that complicated Chinese community life and which were often the outcome of the prejudices held against them in Canadian society, not to talk of the burden of the discriminatory laws against them.

To gain an insight into the life and experiences of the Chinese in Canada, four authors have been taken into consideration and a few of their representative works
which will help illuminate the Chinese experience vividly. This chapter will focus on works of Wayson Choy, born in 1939 in Vancouver, Frederick James Wah, also born in 1939 in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, Judy Fong Bates, born in 1949 in Kaipin, Guangdong, China, but migrated to Canada in 1955 and Sky Lee, born in 1952 in British Columbia, Canada.

Wayson Choy who spent his childhood in Chinatown in Vancouver and is a highly respected and decorated Canadian today, said in an interview, “Your art should be an expression of how you’ve endured and survived, and how you perceive your vision of life.” The Jade Peony, published in 1995 and its sequel, All that Matters, published in 2004 indeed reflect this fundamental philosophy of endurance and survival. The Jade Peony is about the Chen family saga, set in Vancouver’s Chinatown. It traces the lives of a Chinese family from the 1930s to the 1940s through the Depression years and juggles multiple issues related to identity, Chinese beliefs, the conflicting perspectives of life in old China and modern Canada, the status of women, the ordeals of the Chinese immigrant, the complicated relation between the Chinese and the Japanese, both Asian peoples and several other issues of concern. All that Matters carries the story forward through the character of Kiam Kim the eldest son of the Chens. Its plot runs in a parallel manner to that of The Jade Peony and though some events in the book precede events in The Jade Peony, the books essentially continues the family saga and analyses issues already referred to in The Jade Peony. The autobiographical element in the books can hardly be ignored and the underlying spirit of the books corroborate what Choy said, “And I would like to think that I am writing books that…can be read by everyone who believes that the human heart must survive the drama of living.” The Chen family becomes a microcosm of the Chinese community who adapt to survive and struggle to establish identity.
Fred Wah liked to call *The Diamond Grill*, ‘a fake bio-text.’ Born of mixed racial parentage, his father was part Chinese and part Irish-Scots, while his mother was born in Sweden and migrated to Canada at the age of six. At all counts Wah reflected his diverse ethnicity in his writings. He said in 2010 on accepting the Dorothy Livesay Prize “My writing has been sustained, primarily by two interests: racial hybridity and the local, the landscape of the Kootenays in southern B.C; its mountains, lakes, and the forests.” Though his appearance was more White than Chinese, Wah liked to project his Chinese heritage and considered himself thoroughly Canadian. His writings explore the complexities of multiple identities. Wah also admits that impetus for his writings comes from ‘the hyphen in “half-bred” poetics---- Half bred poetics as a game of reaction from within the egg-yolk of my own cultural ambivalence (white on the outside, yellow on the inside)’ (Kamboureli 93). His ‘cultural ambivalence’ as he calls it is a remarkable reflection of the larger Canadian society which was in fact a society accommodating multiple cultures to eventually create one Canadian identity which in turn was a wondrous fusion of many cultures and identities. It is not surprising that Wah says in *Diamond Grill*, “there’s a whole bunch of us who’ve grown up as resident aliens, living in the hyphen…If you’re pure anything you can’t be Canadian” (53).

‘The Diamond Grill’ was a real restaurant which was owned by Fred Wah’s father and was situated on Baker Street in Nelson had since become an optometrist’s office (Wah 178). The book is set around the 1950s and provides a terrific view of Chinese immigrant history through the seemingly simple narrative of life in a restaurant with its myriad cooks, cashiers and helpers, all of whom are inextricably bound to the balancing act of negotiating their Chinese origins with their Canadian identities. Each character has a story that reflects some important aspect of immigrant life, be it the impact of the laws and policies of the government or simply the burden of being an
immigrant in an alien country. Wah writes at the end of the book, ‘The café is a 50s café, which is important for both the history of Chinese-Canadians as well as for the “I” of the biotext since that time marks his own “Naming” (186). The Diamond Grill essentially, without a definite plot succeeds all the same in falling into a certain pattern that captures the vital aspects of Chinese immigrant history and underlines the complexities of the writer’s layered identity through the quaint flavours, smells, recipes and inescapable characteristics of restaurant life!

Also set against a café is Sky Lee’s famed novel, Disappearing Moon Café. Much of Chinatown’s early population was concerned with setting up boarding houses, running laundries, restaurants or cafes. Wah relates in The Diamond Grill that Chinese cooks and Chinamen were in great demand to solve the problem of domestic helps (135). Choy also, it may be remembered, was raised as the son of restaurant owners (Kamboureli 84). In The Jade Peony, the ‘Monkey Man’ who comes to collect the bones of the Chinese, we learn was a cook’s assistant during the days of the Rail Road making. Lee’s novel, Disappearing Moon Café, is a compelling read. Its gripping style keeps the reader on the edge until the central mystery is unravelled at the end of the book somewhat in the manner of Obasan, where the innocent Naomi comes to terms with the truth about her mother’s disappearance only at the end of the novel or with Midnight At The Dragon Café where again a secret lies at the centre of the novel. Lee has great command over her plot and the intricacies of the relations between four generations of women involved in a web of lies, deceit, power play, scandal and love while managing a café. Much of the complications arise due to the insensitive Canadian laws on the hapless immigrants while the rigidities of Chinese culture and tradition complete the rest. Lee, forever a champion of feminist causes, rips apart the lives of her women to lay bare the double edged marginalisation they were subject to --- either by
harsh Canadian society or by merciless norms and conventions prevalent at home within the four walls of the house in the name of preserving quaint family reputation and glory. The events in the book span a period extending from 1892 to the 1980s.

Judy Fong Bates, born in 1949 in Kaiping, Guangdong, China, immigrated to Canada with her mother in 1955 to join her father who had migrated earlier to Allandale, Ontario just before World War I began in 1914. Her novel, ‘Midnight at the Dragon Café’, published in 2004 also gives insight to the Chinese-Canadian experience. Fong Bates grew up as the only non-white and only Chinese in a small Canadian town and through her narrator-protagonist Su-Jen in Midnight at the Dragon Café she relates the Chinese-Canadian experience of a small town girl. Once again set against the background of a restaurant it explores and addresses issues related to Chinese Canadian life in a breath taking style. Above all it tries to present the uncertainties of life and the risks undertaken by the immigrants as they leave behind familiar home territory to build a new one in an unfamiliar country. In an interview, Judy Fong Bates said that she felt that

‘If I had not grown up in the circumstances that I had I may not have become a writer. I think that growing up in a small town, being the child of immigrant parents, living in a way as an outsider I think all those things create a writer...I'm not sure I was born a writer I think somehow the circumstances just created the writer within me.’

Undoubtedly it was circumstances, environment and experience that brought out the writer in the novelists as they found the necessary incentive or motivation to write about the lives of the members of their community from personal experience.

All the novels under consideration are remarkable in their reflection of Chinese-Canadian history. The fictionalised form of reflecting immigrant experience makes a
powerful impact on Canadian history and brings to light the fact that Chinese-Canadian history was chiefly a fall out of the White man’s indifferent policies. It also lays bare the sad transition of the ‘land of hope’ (Wah 113) and ‘land of fresh starts’ (Lee 253) to a land of misery and hopelessness, the ‘Bitter Gold Mountain’ (Wah 27).

*Disappearing Moon Café* begins with Wong Gwei Chen, the patriarch of the Wong family, on a mission to dig out the bones of dead China men to be sent back home to China, the task being entrusted to him by the Benevolent Associations. Interestingly, *The Jade Peony*, which begins with a section titled, ‘Jook-Liang, Only Sister’, where an old monkey faced man Wong Suk develops a beautiful relationship with a young girl Jook-Liang comes on a mission which turns out was also to collect the bones of the dead Chinese in Canada.

“Two thousand pounds of bone going home to China” (Choy, *Jade Peony* 64).

The reference here is to the thousands of Chinese who died during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railways. The words of Prime Minister Macdonald subsequently became quite famous when he told his people that they would have to choose between the Chinese or the railways. ‘Either you must have labour or you can’t have the railway’ (Kelley and Trebilcock 95). More than 15,000 Chinese were recruited to build the Railways and about 6,000 died in the process. The Benevolent Associations which were set up in the Chinatowns had taken upon themselves the task of looking after the affairs of the Chinese in Canada including the responsibility of sending back the bones of the dead to their families in China to be buried in glory. The misery of the Chinese workers who worked under back breaking circumstances in the most dangerous conditions at dismal salaries and in the face of humiliation and discrimination is sharply
jostled to memory. The efforts of the Benevolent Associations are also highlighted. The retrieval of human bones started in 1892 and carried on till the 1930s (Lee 22).

History is also evoked when the infamous Chinese Head tax and Exclusion Acts are constantly referred to in these books. In *The Diamond Grill*, Wah asks wryly, ‘now that you got that head tax will you collect a heart tax too?’ (131). In Judy Fong Bates’s *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, we learn that Head taxes of $500 each were paid by the young protagonist Su-Jen’s father and Uncle to gain entry to Canada on the eve of the First World War (15-16). On completion of the Railways, the Canadian government was in a fix, unable to decide the fate of the thousands of Chinese now left jobless. As a hard working race they excelled in whatever they did and slowly complaints about the Chinese monopolising jobs started seeping in. While some were absorbed into professions not particularly liked by the Whites like running laundries, others were pushed into vegetable vending or running boarding houses, restaurants or cafes. Chinese cooks were in great demand as were Chinese domestic helps. The site of most of the action in *The Diamond Grill*, *Midnight At The Dragon Café* and *Disappearing Moon Café* is set against the backdrop of eating houses. The Chinese in fact, redefined the tastes of North American cuisine and hospitality. Wayson Choy too had a restaurant connect, in the sense that he was the son of a restaurant owner. Apart from these common professions mentioned, the Chinese also did well as businessmen and farmers. The problem of the huge Chinese population however still remained unsolved. The government was keen on trading with China and hence did not wish to deport the Chinese back home, but there was widespread antagonism against the Chinese all over British Columbia. The government thus introduced a Head Tax of $50 in 1885 which was increased to $100 in 1900 and $500 in 1903 to control the inflow of fresh immigrants and when this did not help the situation enough, the infamous revised
Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 was introduced, banning Chinese entry to Canada with the exception of a few special categories of people like students, merchants and diplomats. This Act checked Chinese entry into Canada for the next twenty years (Kelley and Trebilcock 203). “During the next twenty-four years, only fifteen Chinese persons were permitted to emigrate to Canada” (Kelley and Trebilcock 204).

The Chinese retaliated by observing Dominion Day as ‘Humiliation Day’ until the Act was repealed in 1947. Wah regrets in The Diamond Grill that he is lonely since there are hardly any children of his age because of the Act and only in the 1950s the character of Nelson changes with fresh Chinese entries and finally basket ball teams can be formed of young Chinese teenagers (136)! Apart from this, the Canadian government tried other ways to suppress the Chinese community. Women were not allowed entry easily and a direct result of this was that the community sank into a bachelor community which took to heavy drinking and gambling to while away the sorrows of bachelor life as also immigrant life. In Disappearing Moon Café Lee writes that the Whites looked upon the Chinese as ‘depraved and drug infested’ (92). According to a report of the Royal Commission in 1885 ‘The Chinese way of living…compromised the safety of the other communities’ (Kelley and Trebilcock 95). The Whites in fact looked upon the Chinatowns as unhygienic and immoral dens of vices, though they were themselves responsible for this sad state of affairs to a great extent. W. Peter Ward opines in his book White Canada Forever that this was primarily due to the fact that the Chinese population was largely ‘male and transient’ (qtd in Kelley and Trebilcock 96). It may well be argued that the condition of the Chinese in Canada was as such a fall out of the policies of the Canadian government that underpaid them and reduced them to live in isolation and compelled them to live a life of deprivation and discrimination.
The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 ensured the restricted entry of Chinese women to Canada and fuelled the problem of prostitution and gambling and drinking, driving them to extreme conditions for survival. The entire point almost seemed to be a classic case of giving the proverbial dog a bad name and hanging him. Chinese labour was highly sought but little effort was made to see to their welfare in society. They were thus confined to ethnic enclaves where they often lived in pitiable conditions. This is amply reflected in the literature of the Chinese Canadian.

In *The Diamond Grill*, Pong, Lucky Jim and Ed Bentall constantly gamble, Shu smokes endlessly, Sammy Wong adds to the bandwagon of sad unmarried men skilled in their work but with a joyless private life. Wah writes how other than prostitutes or wives of wealthy businessmen, there were hardly any other Chinese women. Choy says that poverty even drove some to remain bachelors as they could not afford to marry a wife, bring her from China and feed her and raise a family in Canada. Gee Sook the bachelor tailor in *The Jade Peony* does not marry as he could ‘never afford a mail order bride’ and thus becomes the cause of much gossip in Chinatown (94-96). In *Midnight At The Dragon Café*, when Lee-Kung the young man is of marriageable age his father gets down to the serious business of finding a ‘mail order bride’. The procedure is long, cumbersome and expensive involving writing letters to prospective brides in China, Su-Jen his sister observes:

> The courtship would be the same, driven by money… my brother would make the initial monetary gestures and if things succeeded, this time he would send money for clothes, for the bride’s family, for a pre-wedding banquet in Hong Kong, for the plane fare, and more (174).

His earlier attempt at marriage failed as the ‘mail order bride’ turned out to be a patient of tuberculosis. The number of Chinese girls in Canada being small, his father
worked tirelessly to find him a suitable bride through this primitive method involving risk and high expenses to see him settled in life and in business. Similarly, the Japanese in Canada too had to go through the ritual of finding ‘picture brides’ in order to marry and procreate.

Lee writes in *Disappearing Moon Café*, ‘Too much whoring in those Powell Street whorehouses…’ (142). The plight of the Chinese was indeed pitiable. Denied the basic pleasures of family life and a draconic uncertainty looming over their futures, the ‘land of hope’ was fast fading, the gold mountain was losing its sheen. One is reminded of the Chinese American writer Shawn Wong’s novel, *Home Base*, (1979) where the writer echoes the barren monotonous life of China men.

The old night train filled with Chinamen, my grandfathers, fathers, all without lovers, without women, struggling against black iron with hands splintered from coarse cross ties."

Wong tells of the emptiness in the lives of the early Chinese Americans and how he identified with their lot and how deliberate pressure from the host country almost killed the spirit of a sturdy, daring and adventurous race. Though fiction, the novels relate with authenticity the actual lived condition of the Chinese from the immigrant’s perspective and not that of the White’s. Hence the vacuum in their lives and the slow disintegration of the community is clearly expressed.

In *Disappearing Moon Café*, Mui Lan, the mistress of the café, fumes when her daughter-in-law cannot bear a child, all the more because the family had paid a lot of money to manage her passage from China to Canada and because the finances involved in bringing another wife would be too heavy to bear. She therefore threatens her daughter in law, Fong Mei with dire consequences if she could not produce a son.
Finally she seeks to solve the problem by arranging for her son, Choy Fuk to have sex with an older woman to pass off their child as Fong Mei’s child, and hence the family heir. A string of bizarre events follow with incestuous relations and extra marital affairs that rock the family with scandal and climax with the premature death of a baby and the tragic suicide of a young member of the revered Wong family on the realisation of her incestuous relation with her brother. Lee writes that the ‘rapidly diminishing Chinese Canadian community had withdrawn into itself, ripe for incest’ (198). This view is actually corroborated by Bates in *Midnight at the Dragon Café* when Lai-Jing the bored Chinese housewife who could never adjust to life in Canada tries to beat the drudgery of everyday existence by entering into an illicit relationship with her step son. The story ends with her giving birth to an illegitimate child which is finally accepted by her husband to be his own and the actual father, being pronounced as its elder brother! The complex relations seem to be an outcome of the inability of some Chinese women to adapt to life in Canada and because of the limited exposure of the men to women of their community. Sex, incest and scandal create complexities and disturbances within the community which had in any case to battle many other problems including discrimination, humiliation and marginalisation by the White community.

Due to the shortage of women of their own community and the high expenses involved in bringing women from China, due to the expensive Head Tax and because of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 which only permitted a select category of persons to enter Canada, the social pattern of life and living was violently disturbed. The most ridiculous and humiliating episode in the book revolves around the frequent betting and gambling on the part of the China town boys over how fast Mui Lan’s son, Choy Fuk could get his waitress mistress pregnant and pass off the child’s as his wife’s.
Diamond Grill also recounts another humiliating Canadian restrictive method which just about missed being passed. The notorious Janet Smith Bill was nearly passed in 1924 when a young Chinese boy was believed to have murdered a White woman, Janet Smith with whom he worked in a White household. This nearly led to the prohibition of White women from being employed along with Orientals. Though the Bill was never passed, Wah writes in The Diamond Grill, that a bill was passed in Saskatchewan preventing White women from working in Chinese enterprises, as a result of which his café employed Japanese girls instead of White. This actually happened in 1912 when the legislature at Saskatchewan passed an Act ‘to prohibit Chinese restaurants, and other small businesses, from employing White women. Similar Acts were later passed in British Columbia, Manitoba and Ontario.’ The incident is a clear pointer to the fact that the Chinese were looked upon with suspicion by the White society they lived in and any provocation could lead to the sternest action against them. It could also be considered a veiled comment on the frustration that had deeply set into the lives of the Chinese community. The absence of Chinese women meant a lot of things apart from the inability to set up home or build healthy relationships. It meant a natural inclination for women who might not even belong to their own community. Such a step obviously alarmed the Canadian society bent on preserving their supposed ‘racial purity’.

Writing about the Janet Smith case, Scott Kerwin says, ‘The bill attempted to combat miscegenation in the province by keeping young White women and Asian men apart, thereby preventing British Columbia from being “mongrelized” at an individual level.’ The racist implications of such an act are easily discernable since the nation was obsessed with ideas related to preserving the purity of their white race. However since such a Bill could violate the Anglo-Japanese treaty of 1911, it could not be
passed. The Chinese were in any case much in demand for their labour as also since Canada had trade relations with China it could not afford to completely antagonise the Chinese population in Canada. Wah’s employment of Japanese girls may be taken as a welcome sign promoting a bond of trust between two Asian communities that came to Canada with similar purposes. In Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, the failure to impose the bill is viewed as the first victory of Chinatown. ‘The Janet Smith bill flopped and became Chinatown’s first real success story’ (304). It also was a pointer to the grand united front put up by the Chinatown leaders.

In *Passage to Promise Land*, Vivienne Poy writes that very few Chinese women actually migrated to Canada as the women were expected to take care of their in laws, families and ancestral graves. This was ironical since, ‘women are the bearers of children, they should be an inseparable part of the men’s lives’ (4). It is no wonder that the community sank into a bachelor community given the Canadian government’s repressive policies and the community’s own orthodox traditions. The consequence of this was the Chinese community in Canada suffered and the conflicts endured by it arose as much from its own traditional system of life as by if not more, the hostile environment it found itself in.

The reference to dubious papers with forged dates of birth and paper sons and daughters in *The Jade Peony* is a reminder to the large scale illegal immigration that took place in Canada especially from Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s. In *All That Matters*, the young boy Kiam Kim recollects how his father and grandmother forged a new relationship with a fellow Chinese immigrant referred to as ‘Third Uncle’ simply through paper.

“The birth certificate and immigration documents that Father had used to come to Canada once belonged to Third Uncle’s dead brother. Dates had been
doctored, of course, to fit Father’s age and circumstance, and the brother’s embossed picture had been expertly lifted off and carefully replaced with one of Father’s. Poh-Poh and I had separate sets of false papers made for us, and all these gai-gee, these ghost papers, bonded us as Third Uncle’s Gold Mountain family” (26-27).

The 1950s was, from the perspective of the Canadian government, ‘an era of illegal Chinese immigration’ and it led the government to carry out raids in Chinese homes through ‘Montreal, Toronto, Peterborough, Sarnia, Winnipeg, Brampton, Regina, Edmonton, and Vancouver’ (Poy 40). No doubt it caused much hardship to the community who in any case were reeling under the burden of humiliation and brutal discrimination. But from their own point of view they were mere pawns in the hands of unscrupulous agents and racketeers who exploited them mercilessly in the name of gaining them entry to a free country. The Chinese also had grudges against the Canadian government for the severe discrimination they faced which made them take to illegal methods to enter the country and stay there. This definitely is a blatant pointer to the fact that the Chinese Canadian was truly a victim of cruel circumstances.

Thus we see that these writings serve as eye openers to not just the unfair policies and inhuman marginalisation of the Chinese people in Canada but also to the exploitation they were subject to right from their homeland China. The fictional accounts of the Chinese Canadian writers do not just tell the world about their sufferings in Canada long suppressed, but also the trials and tribulations faced in order to merely leave home--- China.

According to Poy, the ‘government estimated that it cost between $4,000 and $8,000 to obtain illegal documents to get to Canada. Those who could not repay the cost would be blackmailed and could end up working virtually as indentured labourers’ (41). In the face of such exorbitant costs and uncertainties, the risks taken by the
Chinese immigrant to leave his home to find and build a new one is heroic. Chinese Canadian writing is therefore also a testimony to the heroic spirit of the Chinese race. It reruns Chinese Canadian history which is part and parcel of Canadian history and upholds the remarkable qualities of endurance and patience of the Chinese people which were hardly acknowledged by the Canadian government or perhaps even by many of their own race.

Both Sky Lee and Fred Wah succeed in driving home the point that their works dealt more with the steady break down and near destruction of the Chinese community by Canadian society. Instead of showcasing their rich heritage, industrious nature or remarkable contribution to Canadian life, Canadian society only looked upon the Chinese with bitterness and suspicion. The historical reflection seen in the novels serve many purposes, apart from bringing to the forefront, facts which hitherto remained unknown, they compel Canadian history to accept the experiences of their minority communities to be a part of its own history.

These writings destroy the myth that Canadian history was only about the Whites and their chequered exploits. They also expose the hard fact that instead of glorifying the efforts of the Chinese community to nation building, they have been ignored and looked upon with suspicion and contempt. Today’s wealthy, powerful and developed Canada is debt ridden to the Chinese community that risked its sons to give Canada her railways, and other bounties which enriched it in innumerable ways to present to the world what it is today. In fact it was Chinese sweat and labour that helped ‘to open up British Columbia by building roads and working in mines, forestry, and canneries’ (Poy 3). Chinese Canadian writing stands as a vibrant testimony to this. Apart from the historical reflection of the Chinese experience seen in the works under
consideration it is observed that certain common characteristics feature in a regular fashion in these novels.

Other than evoking the past through the receptacle of memory, all the books under consideration are bound together by certain common features that make them stand apart, perhaps like the ‘new voices’, Choy spoke about in his interview with Montgomery. Like the Japanese writers who created miniature Japans within their homes to create a cosy world to retire to at the end of the day, replete with bric-a-brac reminding them of their island home, the Chinese too tried to recreate a world of their own in their ethnic retreats. Thus in *The Diamond Grill*, a modern cafe, equipped with technologically advanced cooking ranges and gadgets and machines we also have horse shoe shaped counters for luck, the family enjoys playing Mah Jong, and ‘fan tan’, all Chinese games that help the members to unwind. Wah says he even learnt to gamble and bluff from his father (62). Chinese New Year symbolic of ‘juk’ and firecrackers and special condiments from Chinese supermarkets complete the happy picture of ethnic identification as against the harshness of the cold white world outside. In *Disappearing Moon Café*, the site of the Wong family’s pride and financial prosperity, the décor is essentially Chinese and Chinatown itself had a lazy and laid back atmosphere with ‘old men… everywhere in Chinatown, leaning in doorways, sitting at bus stops, squatting on sidewalks.’ (Lee 90). Ting An, the illegitimate son of the family finds solace in a theatre with ‘heavy doors ornately carved with gold flamed dragons.’ obviously reminiscent of old China (141).

In *Disappearing Moon Café*, the chairs of the Chinese Associations are ‘dragon chairs’ (99). The Tong’s assembly hall room had Chinese carved chairs and at ‘one end of the room, three large five-foot porcelain god’s of fortune stood guard, with incense pots beside each one’ (113). Other paraphernalia such as using the abacus for counting,
playing Chinese games like tiles, Mah Jong, dominoes or cards, making and
displaying wind chimes and following Chinese customs help build up a world unique to
the Chinese. In Midnight at the Dragon Café, when Lai Jing and her daughter first
come to Canada, they bring as gifts, ‘a package of ginseng and a set of ivory mah-jong
tiles’ (12) typical Chinese things which symbolise bringing a fragment of China with
them. In fact the Chinese immigrant virtually brought with him his Chinese culture
which he fought desperately to retain and preserve in the face of the greatest odds.

It is important to capture the visible codes of a culture in order to create an
identity. The repeated reference to such paraphernalia underlines the cultural strength of
the community and assists in creating a world distinct from the Canadian one. It gives a
feeling of unity and identity to a community that feels marginalised in the White world.
The attempt at a recreation of the life led in China also gives a feeling of self assurance
and helps remind the younger generation of their cultural richness which they would
perhaps never experience at firsthand.

The ‘Chineseness’ of the books is kept vibrant by the frequent use of Chinese
words and reference to Chinese food. Food and language are important markers of
identity and though the Japanese Canadian writers like Goto and Sakamoto have
peppered their works with great many Japanese words, the Chinese writers have shown
more restraint. Nonetheless, words of the Chinese language appear fairly frequently in
these works, especially with reference to family relations, perhaps because such terms
do not feature in the English language and the exact relation between people can only
be explained by the indigenous Chinese terms. Hence in The Jade Peony, we have Poh-
Poh, or ‘the old one’ (32) to mean the grandmother, who came from China and still has
her roots firmly implanted there though she had in actual time left it long behind. Being
more inclined to China culturally, she is given more lines in Chinese. Hence she says,
‘mo yung’, ‘juk sing’ and ‘gim’ more often than the Canadian born children. She is also more immersed in Chinese superstitious beliefs and ghosts. Jook Liang, the youngest daughter is called ‘Sai Mui’ or ‘little sister’ (84). She enjoys Wong Suk’s ‘Chinglish’, a poor English with a smattering of Chinese.

In Disappearing Moon Cafe, the narrator, Kae has to explain all the relations typical of a Chinese family in order to acquaint the readers with the intricacies of their relationships before embarking on their stories and has to admit that she cannot find the English equivalent for some relations sometimes. So her grandmother is ‘Poh Poh’, her grandfather is addressed as ‘Gong Gong’, her uncle, ‘A Queu’, his wife, ‘A Queu-Mu’, ‘to indicate that she is my auntie by marriage’ (25, 26) her paternal grandmother is ‘Ngen Ngen’, her husband, is ‘Lo Yeh’ and “Poh-Poh’s sister’s oldest son, is called ‘Ai Bew Sook’ (which doesn’t have an equivalent in English)” (26). Not only is the nomenclature of the family relations unique but the books give us an idea of the set up of the Chinese family structure according to old Chinese tradition. In The Disappearing Moon Cafe, Mui Lan tells her daughter in law, Fong Mei that if she failed to produce a child, back in China, her husband would have found a concubine who would mother his children and they would address her as ‘first mother’. In The Jade Peony, the children of the Chen family call their own mother, ‘step mother’ as she is the second wife of their father and step mother to their eldest brother Kiam, born of the father’s first wife. By the end of the book however they call her ‘mother’, her rightful designation. In The Jade Peony, Sekky, the Canada born son says in the right tone of confusion and bewilderment that:

There were different titles for those persons related to us according to the father’s age, the mother’s age, and even the ages of the four grandparents, and according to whether they were mother’s or father’s side…if these persons were tied to us by false papers to obtain immigration visas, they became “paper sons” or “paper uncles,”…” (132).
Like Poh-Poh in *The Jade Peony*, who spoke mostly Chinese for obvious reasons, Lai Jing in *Midnight At The Dragon Café*, who came from Hong Kong with a young daughter is given more lines in Chinese as she was ‘too old to learn’ English (6). Hence we hear her say “Nay sey gwei nah” which she herself translates into “you dead ghost hag”, when White children bully her little daughter (46). Or when the foreign Mrs Dooley comes to their restaurant she says, ‘*Hoo mut-ah?* What does she want?” and then “*Hola, hola*, good, good” (37). Her English steadily improves as she hears more of it and Bates gives her lines containing Chinese and English words to show her gradual grasp of the language. The Chinese words are italicised while the English are not. Her husband who had lived longer in Canada is shown to have a better grasp of English but is not very eloquent. The authenticity of the situation is maintained by giving the characters lines that suit the appropriateness of the circumstances and their individual characters while retaining the Chinese flavour imparted to the narration by the frequent use of Chinese words. Just as modern day Chinese or Italian restaurants try to capture the aura of a China or Italy by decorating their interiors with knick knacks from these countries to give a feel of the culture of these countries in the food served, so also the Chinese Canadian books written in English by second or third generation Chinese are peppered with paraphernalia to capture the aura and spirit of the lives of the Chinese in Canada.

Wah is of mixed parentage, (though he projected his Chinese heritage prominently) and does not create a typical Chinese family structure in *The Diamond Grill* though he gives us an accurate understanding of Chinese history in Canada and the woes of being a Chinese in Canada. The reader is thus ushered into a charmed world, culturally different to the White one outside and made to discover a rich
tradition trying desperately to survive in the face of adversities. Sometimes it is easier for ethnic communities living abroad to keep their traditions alive. This is seen in the case of the Chinese who built a Buddhist temple on Powell Street, quite early in their days of settlement. The older generation of immigrants try to keep hold over the young to prevent the dominant culture from sweeping their own culture away. Thus in *The Jade Peony* old ‘Poh-Poh’ tells Jook Liang sternly, ‘A girl child is mo yung --- useless’ (32) When Jook–Liang wishes to dance like Shirley Temple, she is reminded by Poh-Poh, ‘Aiiiiyaah! How one Chinese girl be Shirlee-Tem-po-lah’ (34)? The grandmother’s cynicism is understandable as she like other first generation immigrants was rigid in her views about retaining Chinese culture having seen and experienced two different cultures first hand and having witnessed the atrocities inflicted by the Whites on the Chinese. The possibility of the Chinese culture being influenced and altered by the dominant culture is both abominable and appalling to her. Like Jook-Liang, Su-Jen in *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, in the company of her friend Jonette Dooley tries to emulate the Canadian gymnast Barbara Ann Scott who becomes something of an icon to her. She goes to a Canadian school, learns to speak English fluently and grows up reading about *The Elves and the Shoemaker* and later *Gone with the Wind* and so on. Her mother also takes pride in the fact that her daughter spoke English like the Canadians and was getting a good education in school.

A prominent aspect of these novels is the Asian or specifically Chinese values that bind the books together. Mui Lan tells Fong Mei that she has to be demure. Fong Mei’s gentle nature always ‘courteous and poised’, leads Ting An, her Chinese friend who had never been to China to think that, ‘Well bred Chinese women were like that...Always thinking of others ahead of themselves’ (Lee 71). Fong Mei’s sister in China writes to her that ‘a good wife must be chillingly correct. You must dress
modestly...a good wife is useful’ (61, 62). Fong Mei’s demeanour reminds one of Chisako, the modest Japanese girl in Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field* who walked with grace, looked shy and behaved in a gentle manner just like a typical Japanese woman according to the narrator Asako. Lai Jing the mother in *Midnight At The Dragon Café* on arrival at her husband’s restaurant in Canada may have been disappointed but immediately got down to learning and performing her duties sincerely and devotedly without a murmur of complain to help run the place smoothly. Su-Jen, her daughter through whom the story is traced, undergoes a humiliating experience in school one day and develops a deep hatred for her White class teacher, yet she is unable to express her frustration and swallows her humiliation because of the strict codes of conduct that is infused in her.

“My father had told me many times about the teachings of Confucius, about the importance of obedience and respect, of always listening to those who were older and wiser. “Su-Jen,” he said to me. “at home, you must obey Ba Ba, Mah Mah, and Uncle Yat. And at school you must obey and respect your teacher” (33).

Common Asian values and notions bind the writings of the Chinese and Japanese writers closely too. They also set rigid codes of conduct for the girls especially to follow. To Fong Mei, returning to her parents’ house after a failed marriage would bring dishonour to the family. The stoicism in Mai-Yee, the young daughter in law in *Midnight At The Dragon Café*, is to be admired when she learns that her new husband had actually fathered his step mother’s child but instead of creating a fuss, she simply congratulates her father-in-law on the birth of his son. Su-Jen cannot but help observe that like “everyone else in my family, Mai-Yee had learned hek fuh, how to swallow bitterness” (309).
To Su-Jen, expressing her dislike for her teacher could also ‘bring dishonour to my family’ (33). She thus chose the path adopted by thousands of her Asian community in the face of humiliation ---- to remain ‘quiet and polite’ (33). This habit of slipping into silence becomes a regular trait with the community which is why she is unable to protest or even clearly express herself when she is jeered at and manhandled one day on the sidewalk and called a ‘chink’ (42). The sense of values ingrained at a young age often turn the Chinese as also the Japanese into passive creatures unable to speak up for their rights. The steps adopted by Su-Jen’s parents to tackle the situation include a plan to buy her a tricycle and prevent her from playing on the streets. In the face of blatant hostility from White society, this was the cleverest way they could think out to handle the situation. Su-Jen who shared a healthy relation with a White girl Jonetta is now slowly exposed to the harsh realities of the world outside. The great divide between the two worlds, the Whites and the non-Whites begins to invade into her innocent life as well.

Another noticeable aspect of the books under consideration is that they all give a glimpse of the beliefs and superstitions of the Chinese people. Just as the Japanese writers filled their books with the myths, legends and folklore of the Japanese people, such as the story of Momotaro, the peach boy, the legend of Izanami and Izanagi, the kappas, or celestial water creatures and so on, the Chinese writers recreate the world of Chinese beliefs and superstitions that evoke the spirit of old China and attempt to give an understanding of the Chinese people through their beliefs. Such beliefs are usually brought out through characters like the grandmother Poh Poh in *The Jade Peony*, as she belonged to the first generation of immigrants or through Jung Sum, the child born in China but adopted in Canada, also in *The Jade Peony* as they had both lived in China and had brought its culture and traditional beliefs along with them. Sex is something
considered completely intellectual and not physical, this draws a sharp contrast between
the Asian way of thinking and the Canadian. Many other things also signify the
differences in their way of thinking and the Canadians. Hence, when there is a
‘Boom…Boom’ sound, to Jook-Liang, born in Canada, it is merely ‘the front door’, but
to Poh Poh it is ‘ghost thunder’. Jook in fact says, that her grandmother’s stories were
full of ‘wild storms and parting clouds, thunder, and after much labour, mountains that
split apart, giving birth to demons who were out to kill you or to spirits who ached to
test your courage’ (21). Turtles brought ‘good fortune. Long life’, they also talked to
ghosts, ‘Turtle talk to ghosts---all the time, ghost talk’ (74)! Jung Sum, the adopted son
who was born in China, says, ‘I believed in ghosts, like everybody else in Chinatown’
(75). The story of the ‘Fox Lady’, the Chinese myth of the Monkey, all keep surfacing
from time to time in the conversations. In The Disappearing Moon Cafe, the breaking
of a glass begins a heated row among the cooks as it signifies a bad omen.

Beliefs and superstitions occur in all cultures. In fact what may be a belief or
token of faith in one culture may be considered as superstition in another culture.
Chinese beliefs and superstitions are typical of their culture. Even today, belief in ‘Feng
Shui’ is an important part of Chinese life. The beliefs in ghosts referred to in these
books are part of the superstitions of old China. The turtle symbolises ‘long life’ in
Indian belief too, there is thus a shared commonality in the beliefs of the Asian people.
The Chinese particularly share many superstitions with the Japanese because of their
long association which is both historical as well as cultural. Many Japanese believe that
certain animals bring them either good or bad luck just as the Chinese do. Jung Sum’s
‘lao kwei’ brings good fortune to Dai Kew’s gamble and earns Jung a dollar to watch a
film with his friend. The association of these events with the turtle may or may not be
logical, but it fortifies Jung’s faith in the turtle’s goodness and in Poh Poh’s words. The
horse shoe shaped counters in The Diamond Grill Cafe signify good luck and are a part of European belief as well as Feng Shui and Indian. Their presence in a Chinese Cafe in fact, underlines the universality of people’s faith in objects without assigning any logical explanation. Poh Poh’s faith in the windchimes that would release her from the foreign world, the sight of the white cat with pink eyes, are all a part of the deep rooted beliefs of the people in a world not explained by logic and reason alone. China has a history and a civilization that goes so far back in time that many of its customs and beliefs continue to be followed by its people in later years, seeming illogical or irrational to those belonging to a different cultural set up. The Chinese cannot be dismissed as a superstitious people from these books, but certainly the older generation of Poh Poh had greater faith in traditional beliefs than the later generations like Jook-Liang who were brought up in Canada. Interestingly, interest in Feng Shui is gathering precedence globally and a great many people design their homes on the lines of Feng Shui or revere articles associated with Feng Shui even outside China.

In Judy Fong Bates’ Midnight at the Dragon Cafe, the protagonist, Su-Jen says that among her prized possessions was a book with ‘Buddha-shaped faces, dotted with moles.’ Each mole on the face suggested a predestined future for it. Her mother she says was adept at ‘reading’ peoples’ faces and coming to conclusions about their natures, characters or even future lives based on the shape, size or positioning of facial organs or marks and moles.

“In the rows of faces, the noses, eyes, lips, and ears are drawn in different shapes. Long, fleshy earlobes mean longevity and wealth; thin lips mean poverty. Whenever Chinese visitors came to our restaurant, I would catch my mother secretly studying their faces. Once there was a Chinese man who passed through our town and had supper with us… His narrow eyes were shaped in an evil way, she told me, a bad person, not to be trusted. Later we found out the man was a notorious gambler and womanizer in Chinatown in Toronto. Sometimes her face readings were more direct. “That man, he has ears that are
too small and thin. No matter how hard he works, he won’t amount to anything” (1-2).

Such beliefs also form part of the tradition of superstitions or beliefs held by a community. Su-Jen’s doubts of her mother’s observations are laid to rest by the confirmation of the stranger’s evil habits. The underlying suggestion here is a statement of acceptance to the Chinese way of life and thought which might appear irrational to the western reader. That the system of beliefs was not merely a pack of useless voodoo but part of a long time tradition to be trusted and respected is quite masterfully emphasized since the mother’s observations, though quaint to the western reader, are made to appear real and substantial.

Chinese American writer Amy Tan’s books are full of references to Chinese beliefs. In *The Joy Luck Club*, a Chinese mother tells her daughter who lives with a White to remove her mirror, placed at the foot of her bed as it would reflect away her happiness. The suggestion may seem obnoxious to the daughter but mother firmly believes in it. Myths and beliefs are part of a person’s culture and they give a better understanding of the culture of the people who follow them.

Interestingly, all the books in focus despite the commonality of many features are brought closer to each other due to a thematically linked common thread resulting no doubt from a shared experience as immigrants from Asia to Canada. The first theme that surfaces is the all obvious conflict and comparison between the old and new China. Such a conflict is evident because of the displacement of the Chinese people from their homes and the unsuspecting influence of the western world on them. Mui Lan says in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, ‘We live in more lenient times’ (49). The chief sites of
conflict between China and Canada are seen in the daily habits of the Chinese people in their homes and in their attitude towards women.

The constant conflict between Chinese and Canadian culture is evident throughout the books. In The Jade Peony, Jook-Liang the young sister idolises Shirley Temple, an American icon. Her grandmother finds her adoration foolish. Likewise Su-Jen imitates the Canadian gymnast Barbara Ann Scott in Midnight At The Dragon Café. While Poh-Poh cooks Chinese food, Jook prefers to eat bread and sausages. She likes to dress western in frocks and dance like Shirley Temple. She eats her soup ‘slowly, noiselessly. In the western way’ while old Wong Suk who had lived mostly in China, slurped his soup loudly (26). The films Jook-Liang watches or those her brothers watch are English films. Her idea of fun is to go to the movies, eat at the ice cream parlour or ‘play out Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest’ (57), again a western world icon. China to her is a distant land, war stricken and replete with ghosts, superstitions, slaves and cruel masters. In Disappearing Moon Café, Choy Fuk, the young scion of the Wong family, dresses western, wears a tie, trousers with suspenders and smokes. He adopts western sartorial tastes but falls prey to his mother’s primitive schemes for producing an heir to the family. Thus it is fairly easy for his mother to coerce him to visit another woman to provide the Wong family its heir. The simple explanation being that had the family been in China, the son would have automatically taken a concubine if his wife proved to be barren.

His mother Mui Lan spent many hours lamenting her fate and wistfully remembering her days in China. Had they not been in Canada, she would have been playing with her grand children, gossiping with other women and eating melon seeds. Her greatest grudge is towards her daughter in law Fong Mei, who has remained childless and hence in her opinion failed to give the venerable Wongs an heir. The
question of getting another bride for him was unthinkable as Fong Mei had been brought to Canada from China under very difficult circumstances which included spending a fortune and facing harassment from the ‘devil authorities’ (that were) ‘treading on the tang people’s heads all the time’ (40). Moreover she had checked into Fong Mei’s background thoroughly and had discovered that her sister had given birth to as many as three sons and was again in the family way. To add to her woes she is informed by her husband that the Chinese Exclusion Act had been passed, prohibiting the entry of the Chinese to Canada and hence her final hopes of a second wife for her son crumbles completely.

A time comes when she threatens to throw Fong Mei out of the house because of her barrenness and reminds her sternly that had they been in China, her husband would have got a concubine to have children and they in return would call her ‘first mother.’ But as she tells her, they live in ‘liberal times’ so she has got away lightly. Without a child, Fong Mei would not even have someone to ‘sweep her grave’ (81). Fong Mei weeps and pleads but ultimately has to bear the humiliation of seeing her husband leaving her and going away to another woman to get her pregnant. She is even taunted by him that once the woman became pregnant, she would not feel lonely as she would have her husband’s child to look after. Mui Lan enjoys Fong Mei’s discomfiture with sadistic pleasure as she knew that ‘a spurned daughter-in-law would rather commit suicide than go back to her parents’ home, for all the ten generations of everlasting shame that she would cost her family, in fact her whole village’ (80). Mui Lan in her arrogance and dominance and Fong Mei in her humility and submissiveness typify the Chinese attitude to women.

The desire for a son is also seen in The Jade Peony, where Jook-Liang is constantly told by her grandmother that she was ‘useless’ or ‘mo yung’, that she was
too spoilt and that life in China was far more difficult for a girl. Her grandmother even tells her that ‘... if you want a place in this world, do not be born a girl-child’ (Choy 31). To this Jook indignantly replies that they were in Canada and not old China. Poh Poh had herself had endured many pains there. Jook complains that when her younger brother cried, he got a lot of attention, while she was left to cry alone. The book in fact begins with Jook Liang talking about her grandmother’s regular visits to the Tong Association Temple to pray for her pregnant daughter-in-law to give birth to a son (13). This craving for a male child is also seen in Obasan, where the family of the Katos and Nakanes are jubilant on the birth of a son, Stephen, Naomi’s brother, though he hardly does anything worthwhile to bring honour to the family. The birth of the son was a welcome sign while daughters were viewed as the eternal distraction, the daughters of Eve. When Kiam the eldest son of the Chen household in The Jade Peony was being trained to assist in the family business matters, he was also being trained to shun the company of women (98).

The status of women in pre Revolutionary China was subservient to that of men. The birth of a boy was preferred as he could carry on the family name. The concept of marriage was essentially based on socio-economic factors and was more in the nature of a contract between families. The practice of concubinage was prevalent. Changes were introduced in the second half of the twentieth century that improved the status of women. Cara Abraham writes, “The Marriage Law of 1950 outlawed many harsh practices directed against women, including arranged marriages, concubinage, dowries, and child brides.” It may be said that the status of women in old China was quite pitiable. Many efforts were later made by the People’s Republic of China to amend the marriage laws and the 1950 Marriage law was passed. Since then, many more laws have been passed to make marriages more humane.
Mui Lan and Poh-Poh from *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Jade Peony*, respectively, belong to old China and its rigid culture. The train of events set off by Mui Lan in her desire for a grandson bring shame, scandal and a whole bundle of woes culminating in incest and suicide. Choy and Lee show how the women suffered multiple discriminations. Caught between the fierce tentacles of rigid, orthodox family rules and expectations and the harsh racist attitude of White Canadian society, the women were in an unenviable situation. Their situation might be compared to the free spirited world of Kelora Chen a native of Canada, and it is not surprising that the much maligned Fong Mei actually wishes to run away from Chinatown with the natives to find freedom and respite.

It is not only the women who suffer this double edged discrimination, but also the men. The most pathetic instance of such discrimination is that of Choy Fuk, Fong Mei’s husband. Pressurised by his mother to have a child outside marriage, he surrenders finally and agrees to sleep with an older and unattractive woman. Laughed and taunted by his friends, begged, pleaded and nagged by his wife, he leaves home to have sex with the woman chosen by his mother. On the way he is targeted by a gang of white boys:

Chinkee, chinkee chinaman, eats dead rats.  
Eats them up like gingersnaps (131).

His dilemma is traumatic. Bullied and dominated by his mother and nagged by his wife, his family life is a mess. His Chinese friends deride him, and his social life within the Chinese community despite his name and fortune is miserable. Outside this, he is the target of racist attacks which remind him that he is at peace nowhere. The interesting factor to note is that once Fong Mei becomes the mother of children, her status in the
family shoots up, perhaps because she has fulfilled the purpose of providing heirs to the Wong family. Mui Lan slowly fades out and Fong Mei takes the place of the dominating matriarch. She slowly but surely steps into the shoes of her mother in law and dominates her children’s lives.

Another important theme that surfaces is that of identity. For an immigrant, identity can be a serious cause of crisis. An immigrant has in fact to grapple with multiple forms of identity. The Chinese Canadian is of Chinese origin and Canadian nationality. Wah muses rightly in *The Diamond Grill*, ‘Race makes you different, nationality makes you the same’ (36). If the primary intention of the writers in focus is to bring to light the condition of the Chinese immigrant in Canada, then the establishment of the Chinese identity against a larger Canadian identity becomes inevitable. To create a separate Chinese entity different from that of the other many migrant communities in Canada becomes a daunting task. To merge into the mosaic and yet stand out becomes a veritable challenge. To accomplish this all the writers in question have adopted some important markers that help identify the Chinese situation and condition. Two important markers are that of food and language. About food it may be said that ‘the way any human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, its oneness, and the otherness of whoever eats differently.’ Clinching on this essential factor the Chinese writers are able to bring forth the uniqueness of the community and also its ‘otherness’ from the rest of society. Food becomes a terrific marker that imparts a symbol of the self and an identity to the community and at the same time an instrument to project its difference from others.

In *The Diamond Grill*, the major motif that emerges is that of food. In fact it assumes a character of its own outgrowing the human characters as it is the food that defines the people, the location, the atmosphere and the very spirit of the book. Wah’s
mixed parentage which he described in the most vivid manner as an egg, the white being his Swedish appearance and the inside yellow being his Chinese blood finds clear reflection in the novel. *The Diamond Grill* is a café that is technically modern and equipped with state of the art machines seen in the most modern Canadian restaurants and though it serves both Chinese and Canadian food, it stands testimony to the merging of two distinct identities --- Chinese and Canadian. It is the site where the east and the west actually meet. But before this idealistic merging takes place, the Chinese identity of its writer looms large. The people who work in it are all Chinese, save two Japanese girls. There are frequent references to historical events and circumstances that have affected the course of life for the Chinese Canadians. At the Diamond Grill, Tofu and vegetables, Lo Bok, or turnip, bean curd paste and soy sauce all jostle for space with desserts, pies, butter tarts, doughnuts and Christmas cakes. Wah admits that the Chinese section of the menu is small, this actually has a huge symbolic significance --- the fact that the Chinese are numerically a minority in Canada. Though Chinese cuisine is popular and many variations and adaptations are available today, the bigger chunk of the menu in a café caters to the mainstream White taste.

In *Midnight At The Dragon Café*, Su-Jen’s mother, Lai-Jing, unhappy and lost in the nostalgia of life in China finds true pleasure in cooking Chinese food in the west. Su-Jen says how her mother bought the ingredients herself, the ‘dried shrimp, dried oysters, and dried mushrooms…’(64). She cooked ‘pots of rice and steamed on top bits of Chinese bacon and dried pressed duck or salted fish chopped up with ginger and pork…fresh tofu in soup or fried with vegetables’(64). She says her mother’s concern with food developed into ‘an obsession’ (64). For a lonely immigrant the cuisine of the native country serves as a reminder of her roots and gives a sense of identity and confidence. While Su-Jen could take delight in the tastes and aromas of the Dooley’s
bakery, her mother’s inclination to native food bordering on an obsession was understandable. For Lai-Jing, the language, environment and cultural and social milieu of Canada was strange, alien and hostile. One way to counter it and beat her loneliness out was to cook food that she was familiar with and eat and serve it with passion. She found the Canadian style of eating unwholesome. She believed that the foreigners, the ‘lo fons’ consumed ‘too much yang food with their French fries, hamburgers…chocolates’ and so on (64). She believed in a balance in her diet with the right amount of ‘yin and yang qualities of food’, in other words, the medicinal values of food. Here food becomes not only a marker of her identity as a Chinese but a weapon or tool to challenge the superiority of the Whites in their unhealthy eating habits. Food serves as her instrument of assertion and weapon to defy the hostile culture of the host land. Food in fact has a very powerful presence in the novel and Bates has piled on delightful details of the exotic food cooked in the restaurant. Chinese food gives a mark of identity to the characters and in fact to the book itself. Food is also employed as the means to express emotion. When Lai-Jing and her step son Lee-Kung become sexually involved, they cook Chinese food together and make and serve food that the other enjoys. Food thus becomes a significant motif that comes out of the confines of the kitchen and assumes a character of its own.

In *The Jade Peony*, Poh Poh, the grandmother makes twice cooked chicken and rice. There is indeed a complex relationship between humans and food. And perhaps a mysterious one too. When Jook-Liang’s mother is expecting her third child, she is weak and Poh-Poh and Mrs Lim make a concoction of leaves and roots and steamed them into a tea for her. This because, China was at war with Japan and there was a shortage of women’s herbs from China (72). In times of illness and crisis people fall back on their indigenous customs and time tested eating habits for assurance and comfort. When
Poh-Poh falls sick she insisted on eating a concoction of boiled ginseng root and bitter extract (143). However the younger generation had more faith in hospitals than in her traditional medicines. They also prefer Canadian food, as Jook-Liang eats bread and sausage while her grandmother looks on. But despite all efforts to be Canadian it is impossible for the children born in Canada to be considered as real Canadians. Sek-Lung or Sekky as he is called to make him sound more Canadian says contemplatively:

But even if I was born in Vancouver, even if I should salute the Union Jack a hundred million times, even if I had the cleanest hands in all the dominion of Canada and prayed forever, I would still be Chinese (135).

The irony of the situation being that Sekky ‘preferred English’ and found ‘Chinese words awkward and messy’ (134). Though food habits and language help the process of asserting identity, in the case of Sekky and thousands of others like him, Canada is home and all about identity though this would never be acceptable to white society. The nagging feeling of being an outsider in his ‘own’ country will haunt him. When he asks his mother about his identity, his grandmother says, ‘Chinese’ while his father says ‘Canadian also.’ The duality of the identity causes a psychological confusion. The grandmother stubbornly sticks to her Chinese origins and can only identify herself with being Chinese. Canada is the alien nation that offers a cultural set up in total contrast to her own and in fact underlines the feelings of isolation and marginalisation in her. To her son however, the greater victim of marginalisation since he had greater dealings with the outside white world, Canada was the country of food and work and livelihood. His Canadian citizenship meant a lot to him. Well aware of the implications and advantages of a Canadian citizenship, he assures his son that despite being Chinese, they were ‘Canadian also’. Fred Wah too had to negotiate many identities. In *Disappearing Moon Café*, the Chinese characters face the same problem, while Ting
An, of Chinese and native blood has his own share of problems to grapple with. Together with the problem of blood, gender, and social position, financial status plays a part in shaping the lives of the Chinese in Canada.

The idea of being ‘yellow’ in ‘white’ Canada has much significance. It means being at the mercy of Canadian laws, hence it means, debarment from several professions, it means powerlessness and until 1947, the denial of the right to vote. It also means being constantly referred to as ‘chink’. It means being looked upon with contempt and facing discrimination. It means suffering from perennial ill treatment. It also mostly means being cornered to and forced to a life of bachelorhood for men and often prostitution for women.

Gender plays a marked role in any society. For Chinese women in Canada, the fate of a woman is almost sealed. The small number of women drives many to prostitution but the few who come to wealthy families by marriage have to toe the line and submit to rigid family rules. Fong Mei’s plight is well known. Though married into the illustrious Wong family who spent a fortune to bring her to Canada and organised a lavish wedding, her primary role was to provide a male heir to the family. Until that happened, she was victimised by her mother-in-law, threatened to be sent back to China or even to bear the humiliation of seeing her husband go to another woman for the fulfilment of the objective of bringing in an heir to keep the family name going. When Jook-Liang’s father’s first wife dies another woman is brought down from China, to either be a concubine or a family servant or a ‘kind of second-class wife to her husband’. But as Poh Poh, her mother-in-law puts it, ‘In Canada, one husband, one wife’ so she would be called ‘stepmother’ but her status would never be the same or as honourable as that of the first wife’s and she would remain secondary in status to the first wife albeit dead (Choy 131). Chinese women it may be observed still followed
traditional roles even in foreign land and were still bound by customs and rituals practised in back in China. When they stepped out of their homes they were victims of racial discrimination. At home they had to submit to rigid conventions. It was clearly a case of marginalisation on many fronts.

The social position of the Chinese immigrant was insignificant. Sek-Lung, though Canada born knew that he was the ‘Canadian-born child of unwanted immigrants’ and whose birth certificate bore the words, ‘RESIDENT ALIEN’ (135-136). His forefathers’ conditions had been worse:

‘each Chinatown old-timer, had been driven out of China by droughts, civil wars and famines. They put their marks on foreign labour contracts and ended up in Gold Mountain engulfed by secrets’ (133).

As miners, labourers, vegetable vendors, laundry men or shopkeepers and restaurant owners, the Chinese did not enjoy a happy position in society. Judy Fong Bates said in a personal conversation, ‘My father washed people’s clothes for a living. You know that doesn’t make you part of the mainstream.’ After the infamous Janet Smith incident in 1924, a Bill was almost passed to prohibit the employment of White women and Orientals in the same household. Though it did not happen, the Chinese were looked upon with suspicion and contempt and in fact enjoyed little position in society except for the very rich business men. The greatest frustration of the Chinese was perhaps due to the fact that despite being educated they could not be employed as professionals. Many of his uncles remained, in the words of Sekky, the young boy in The Jade Peony “an educated fool” (139). Only Canadians could be employed as professionals and the Chinese born in Canada were all ‘educated alien’ (139).
Economic conditions play an important role in shaping anybody’s life. The Chinese came to Canada first and foremost for economic reasons, to escape the poverty and trauma of war and find a better life. Once in Canada, it began to mean something more. Even it did not mean earning respect in society it definitely meant certain privileges over other fellow immigrants. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Choy Fuk is a wealthy young man while Seto Chi, a poor girl. Despite his strong financial condition, Choy Fuk is taunted as ‘Chinkee chinkee chinaman’ (131) and the impoverished Seto Chi is derided along with other Orientals as “chinks, japs, wops, and hindoos!” (175). Their financial status is of little consequence to the Whites who mock them for their appearance and cultural otherness. Yet, Choy Fuk is able to afford other luxuries, he may not find success in reporting to the Police about the urchins who scorned his Chinese appearance and mocked him on the road with racist insults but he can afford the luxury of bearing the cost of bringing a wife to Canada from home, China. Money can buy him a Chinese mistress to continue his family name. At the same time it is money that is the root of all evil, because he debases himself by cheating on his wife and listening to his mother only out of fear of being disinherited. Mui Lan’s fears of her son being childless also has an economic significance, it would mean that the family business built so carefully in foreign land would fall to ruin!

The life of a Chinaman in Canada was nothing but ‘the privilege of sending a few dollars back to the family-name clan starving in war-torn, famine and drought cursed China.’ And as more was sent, more came the pleas, “Send more money, send more, send more” (Choy, *Jade Peony* 134). It was a suffocating humiliating life, the sole motive of which was to earn money and send home. Pong, the silent partner of the ‘Diamond Grill’, does not bring his wife from China but lets her live in Hong Kong
with her sister and sends her money. ‘She wants more money every month’ (Wah 24).

The Chinese is after all,

‘a yellow peril...an Asiatic Exclusion League problem, a huckster, a leper, depraved opium addict, a slant eyed devil...a heathen, a bone scraping ghoul, a pest...a chinkie-chinkie Chinaman…’ (Wah 59).

The dilemma of the Chinese then is unenviable. He is reduced to a supplier of money to his family back home and is degenerated to a life of isolation and dejection. It is no wonder that the theme of isolation, struggle for survival, racism, nation and home are all entwined in a complex manner in the novels and these issues are bound to human relations. The relation with old China, the retention of its many values and the yearning to be part of Canada and not considered an ‘other’ further complicate the focus of these novels. Though many hardships drove the Chinese to Canada, the problems encountered there and the fear of repatriation diluted much of their happiness. No wonder, Poh Poh says that old China had ‘bigger and better things than anything in Canada’ (Choy, Jade Peony 137). The theme of isolation is often explored in immigrant writing along with that of survival. Immigrant life is all about adapting and adjusting in new land and finding ways and means of survival in order to beat isolation and loneliness and build a successful life. The novels of the Chinese authors probe the concept of isolation and survival from both from the ‘outside’ perspective, i.e. from the isolation faced from society and from the ‘inside’ perspective, in other words, the isolation perceived within the community.

The early immigrants, who came from Guangdong in China to Canada, were segregated physically, socially and culturally. During the gold rush and soon after the Chinese were physically isolated and accused of depriving the Whites of jobs due to their readiness to work at low wages. Hostility towards the Chinese expressed itself in a
major way. In 1871, British Columbia joined the Confederation and since the majority of the Chinese lived there, anti-Chinese feelings were most intense there. Segregation and isolation became a greater reality as the natives and Chinese were disenfranchised. In fact Fong Bates, when questioned on her plots, admitted in a personal interview, that she wrote to look into ‘the whole issue of isolation’\textsuperscript{15} Canadian laws prevented the Chinese immigrants from mixing freely in society. In 1881, Prime Minister Macdonald had made it clear that the Chinese labourers had to be employed to make the railways a reality. Chinese labourers and miners were efficient and despite the poor treatment meted out to them and the low wages paid, they continued to work with vigour. The discriminations suffered however drove them to little shacks which grew into settlements and were peopled with only the Chinese. As Uma Parameswaran rightly points out, ‘there has been something in the Canadian reality that perpetuated ghettoization rather than coexistence’\textsuperscript{16} The settlements that grew into Chinatowns became centres for upholding the Chinese way of life and may have developed into tourist spots today as also symbols of the multicultural face of Canada, but they are the starting points of the balm to the collective misery of the much maligned Chinese community that organised these ethnic towns as retreats and homes in this foreign land. The first Chinatown was incidentally established in Victoria, British Columbia in 1858 (Poy 3).

The shacks along the rail tracks were temporary in structure and provided little warmth or security. The Chinese were however happy enough to retreat to a place where they could be on their own in the midst of their own people, even though they were highly disadvantaged. By 1882, hundreds of Chinese had died either due to the cold, malnutrition, disease or accidents while building the railways. The years following the completion of the railways saw the Chinese immigrants being imposed by
the Head Tax and the humiliating Exclusion Acts from 1923 to 1947. It was only after the participation of several Canada born Chinese in the Second World War that slowly enfranchisement and participation in political life started. Chinese Canadian history is thus a history of isolation, segregation and survival. And Chinese Canadian writing is testimony to all this. Elie Wiesel has written:

If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the Sonnet… our generation has (also) invented a new literature, that of testimony.\textsuperscript{17}

The writings of Choy, Wah, Lee and Bates are veritable testimonies to the experiences of the Chinese in Canada. In \textit{Disappearing Moon Café}, Lee writes about the plight of Gwei Chang the patriarch of the Wong family and how his state of being was representative of the entire Chinese community in Canada “These overseas Chinese were like derelicts, neither here nor there, not tolerated anywhere; an outlaw band of men united by common bonds of helpless rage” (104). Though men like Hing-Wun in \textit{Midnight At The Dragon Café} believed hard work and education could work wonders for a person, the women characters are mostly lonely, sad and homesick.

When Mui Lan comes to Canada with her son she is shocked to discover the men folk were ‘like stone’ (Lee 35). This is of course metaphoric because the harsh living conditions had made them hard and unemotional. The gambling, womanising, drug addiction found scattered among the pages of Chinese Canadian writing are testimonies to the isolation and segregation suffered by the men and which spilled over to the lives of the women. Inhuman laws and daily taunts made it impossible to assimilate in to mainstream society or to think of being a part to it. The entire business of life was to learn to survive. Wah recounts a trivial incident in \textit{Diamond Grill}, which grows out of proportion and acquires racist hues and serious dimensions. Once as a
child he had shouted at a bus that was going uphill, while he and his friends was sleigh riding. What follows is a terrible ordeal incorporating complaints to his father followed by a hard dose of spanking and a stern lecture from his father that he had to be careful while dealing with Whites as he was the son of a Chinese businessman and everything would finally come down on him. The incident is significant as it shows how at a very young age children are taught that they are different, they are the ‘other’ and have to behave in a manner that befits their race and skin colour. A sense of segregation from society is instantly instilled in the child who will grow up knowing that his race is inferior and that he has to be permanently on his guard in a country he was born in and considered his own.

The isolation faced by the Wong clan in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, is also a fall out of the segregation faced from society. The ruthless factionalism that will politicise its internal complications leading to evils like adultery, incest and suicide may all be attributed to the suffocating atmosphere within the family that could not negotiate its isolation from the outside world with its ambitions and greed that will tear up its inner world.

The ugliest form of isolation is seen perhaps in *The Jade Peony*, in the pathetic suicide of the hapless Meiying the Chinese girl who dared to love a Japanese boy. Her crude attempt at taking her life crystallises the naked violence, hatred and discrimination suffered by a society. That the Chinese interaction with the White was not a happy one is more than evident throughout the novels in consideration but the saddest manifestation of separation is seen when two Asian people who leave their native homes for the same reasons, to fight poverty and find a better life battle it in the land of dreams and cannot survive in unity or harmony. With the outbreak of the Second World War and the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the Chinese slowly turned to
allies while the Japanese turned to foes. While the Japanese were targeted and interned many Chinese enlisted in the army. Segregation and isolation become the two greatest nightmares for the immigrant then.

The process begins with the decision to leave home, to segregate oneself willingly from one’s roots. The segregation intensifies in foreign land with isolation in society, then community and fellow communities and climaxes with isolation from the self. A crisis in identity often results in silence. Sometimes it is the silence of the gold mountain as Mui Lan said, sometime it is the silence that Kogawa tried to express, sometimes it is the eternal silence to which Meiying and Suzanne Wong drifted into as they could not bear the weight of segregation and the weight of the humility piled on them by a heartless society. When segregation challenges survival, a desire to face the challenges makes survival possible, but when survival itself becomes an object of fear, it leads to devastation. The immigrant experience can be either, like Gwei Wong’s who fought to survive or like Suzanne’s, who could not bear the burden of pain and fear and thus faded away.

Silence and isolation are inextricably entwined in all the novels by the Chinese in Canada. Any minority community feels relatively safe in the comfort of silence when confronted by a powerful dominant and antagonistic majority. The Chinese too took refuge in silence much like the Japanese after them and preferred to confine themselves to their ethnic enclaves and engage in professions suited to their skills like running businesses or eateries or in professions not liked by the Whites. However they were as a race daring and enterprising and unlike their Japanese counterparts more vocal about the discriminations made against them. As early as the mid 19th century, when burial grounds segregated the Chinese graves from the others and refused to even engrave the names of the dead, with merely ‘Chinaman No 1’ or ‘Chinaman No 2’ inscribed on the
graves, the Chinese retaliated by engraving the names of their dead fellowmen in Chinese characters in the now well known L block of the Ross Bay cemetery in Victoria.

Even after death, the Chinese were segregated from westerners. Ross Bay Cemetery in Victoria for example was divided into 21 blocks of which Block L was set apart for the burials of “Aborigines and Mongolians.” The Burial Records reveal that the first Chinese person interred there on 18 March 1873 was listed as “Chinaman No 1” and subsequently Chinese burial plots designated as “Chinaman No 2”, “Chinaman No 3” and so on. The Chinese responded by establishing a traditional altar in Block L and Chinese characters were used to inscribe Chinese names on the tombs; Block L was referred to as the Chinese cemetery.¹⁸

In 1920 the Chinese protested vehemently and led a strike when school children were forcefully segregated in Victoria. Finally under pressure, the Victoria School Board was compelled to withdraw the policy of segregation. A similar spirit was seen among the Chinese businessmen who tactfully organised themselves into unions to seek equality with the Whites or to simply counter attack the growing injustice and discrimination against them. Thus in 1916, The Chinese Labour Union was set up. In the 1920s, The Chinese Workers’ Protective Association was set up, and in 1935 The Unemployed Workers Association came up. The Cooperative Commonwealth Association was set up in 1932. All these unions were effective as they used strikes as a means to seek equality with the whites. The Chinese Workers’ Protective Association even had an alliance with the Communist Party of China. The Cooperative Commonwealth Association even rooted for voting rights for the Chinese and Japanese communities in Canada. The Japanese too set up unions to protect their rights around this period of time.

By insisting on participating in the Second World War, Chinese soldiers succeeded in proving their loyalty to Canada and finally helped in getting their voting
rights and repealing the hateful discriminatory Acts against them. Slowly the process of appropriation or assimilation into Canadian society started and eventually the stage for a distinct Chinese Canadian identity different from other communities began to be set up.

The undaunted spirit of the Chinese is seen particularly in their writings where they chose to expose the plight of the Chinese in Canada and the unfair treatment meted out to them. Bennett Lee is of the view that Chinese Canadian writing is a recent phenomenon because the Chinese in Canada were:

for a long time denied full participation in Canadian society by discriminatory legislation, beginning in 1875 with disenfranchisement...and culminating with the exclusionary provisions of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 which in effect banned entry to Canada to all but a few Chinese.19

Once however the process started there was no looking back. The initial silence was broken by a string of writings by the second generation who wrote on and about the travails of the first generation of immigrants based on their observations and interactions with them as also about their own experiences in Canada. The difference in the attitudes of the many generations of immigrants is reflected in the culture clashes between them which in turn is based on the extent to which the appropriation of Canadian cultural was possible for them as also factors like closeness to the original homeland China or the extent of exploitation and suffering undergone by them. The silence of the first generation is often questioned as against the frankness of the second or third generation of immigrants. If the Japanese were essentially quiet sufferers as was believed to be characteristic of their race, the Chinese were terrified into submissiveness and silence by the appalling discriminations against them. As a minority group they did not behave in a manner uncharacteristic of a minority
community facing marginalisation. As a people who migrated to Canada to escape atrocities, and for a better life, they no doubt underwent a feeling of shock and grave disappointment but they were usually clear about their choice about not going back but fighting on and staying in the country of their dreams. In *The Jade Peony*, Poh-Poh frequently tells her granddaughter about her birth in China and how she was dismissed as ugly and worthless. Her father obsessed with the idea of a son, spat at her mother and deserted them forever. Her mother was advised by the midwife, “Get rid of the useless girl-child” (40). Like many miserable Chinese she found her way to the Gold Mountain. Sek Lung the ‘third brother’ was well aware that:

“Each *lao-wah-kiu*, each Chinatown old-timer, had been driven out of China by droughts, civil wars and famines. They put their marks on foreign labour contracts and ended up in Gold Mountain engulfed by secrets” (133).

The early Chinese sojourners came with a view to make a fortune and go back. Many could not afford to and hence stayed on but when the first wave of immigration started around the 1850s the primary motive of the Chinese was to settle down for a better life at least until things improved back home in China. Those affected by personal tragedies or ‘droughts, civil wars and famines’ among other things, came to Canada with an intention of settling down permanently and aspired to sponsor those still willing to migrate from China.

How far the second or subsequent generations of immigrants were capable of representing the truth behind the feelings of the early generation of settlers and immigrants may be a matter of argument. Since the first generation only wrote in their native tongue and mostly about their hardships, their actual feelings may be fairly unknown to us. One poem in a prison cell wall reads:
Having amassed several hundred dollars, I left my native home for a foreign land. To my surprise, I was kept inside a prison cell! I can see neither the world outside nor my dear parents. When I think of them, tears begin to stream down. To whom can I confide my mournful sorrow. 20

However since the Chinese Canadian writers mostly wrote about the experiences of their families and friends, their writings may be said to be fair representations of their community Chinese Canadian writing in English also tries to capture this hardship as also other factors including the travails of settling down, the discriminations faced, the efforts made by the community to make a success of their lives and gain acceptance in Canadian society as also the diverging attitude of the different generations of immigrants.

Wayson Choy and Fred Wah were born in the late 1930s while Judy Fong Bates was born in the late 1940s. By then the Chinese were already in Canada for nearly two hundred years, if the pre-immigration settlers are taken into account. What was the concept of the home to these writers and how had the concept been to their fore fathers remains a question of concern. All the more in the case of immigrants like the Chinese who left one home in China to find a new home in foreign land.

The writers in question would mostly like one to believe that to the first generation of immigrants, China was their only home and Canada the place of work. Though characters like Naoe or Poh-Poh show no desire to return even though Japan as in the case of Naoe, and China as in the case of Poh-Poh always appears better than Canada. In All That Matters, Poh Poh frankly tells her grandson Kiam Kim that to go back to China would mean starvation and also the ugly truth that the girl child was unwelcome. His father assures him that nightmarish practices
like female infanticide did not exist in the Gold Mountain. (Choy, *All That Matters* 49-50) Mui Lan however had little attachment to Canada, to her, home would always be China despite the poverty back there. Fong Mei could boast of wealth and property in Canada but had little happiness. In *Midnight At The Dragon Café* Su-Jen and her mother, Lai Jing are in for a shock when they first arrive in the land of plenty. After the busy hustling life in Hong Kong, Irvine in Canada seemed to Lai Jing, a place, “so quiet you can hear the dead.” (18) Their reason for immigration being many, among which the security of the child Su-Jen and opportunities for good education were primary. Su-Jen says that she is told by her mother that:

“There I would have a better life, I could go to school and our family would be together. But I knew if she had her way we would stay in China despite her fear of the Communists. Whenever I asked my mother who the communists were, she was unable to explain in a way I understood; I only knew that in Canada, we would be safe from them” (7).

Su-Jen’s understanding is further strengthened by the words of Aunt Hai-Lan who had migrated earlier to Canada and was the proud owner of a refrigerator and an electric stove, obviously a reminder to the better life craved for, by the Chinese in their readiness to migrate to Canada.

“And it’s safe here,” said Aunt Hai-Lan. “Not like in China, where we worried about bandits in the country and pickpockets in the city. Here there are no bandits, not even beggars. *Eeii-yah!*” (11).

Her father’s words provide the final assurance about the superiority of Canada over China.

“He had told me that Canada was a good country, that the government cared about the people, that school was free and children had to go until
they were sixteen, unlike China when he was a boy where only the rich could afford to stay in school” (20).

The attitude to China and the idea of a home is far more complex than it actually appears. Understandably the need to create a new home arises with every change of place and to the “huaqiao” or “overseas Chinese” (Li, Encyclopedia 355-356) who left China to rebuild his life and escape from many persistent problems, Canada was deigned to be not just the mountain of gold but a veritable new home as well. Whatever the reasons for migration, Lai Jing and Su-Jen to escape Communist rule and unite with family (Midnight At The Dragon Café), or Poh-Poh, her son and grandson Kiam Kim to ‘escape the famine and the Civil Wars’ (Choy, All That Matters 5) or Mui Lan and Fong Mei to join their Canada based husbands (Disappearing Moon Café), the ultimate goal was to set up a home where they would be safe and free of want.

To many this dream came true and despite the discrimination faced, ranging from sheer contempt to even being victims of street violence, the Gold Mountain dream became a reality which they lived and passed on to their children. With the passage of time they created their own Chinese Canadian identity and jolted the fabric of Canadian White identity to redefine a new multicultural identity of which they were significant contributors. To many however the dream soured and the disappointment of life in China mingled with hope for better life which had brought them to Canada drove them back to China. The hard life, the difficult working conditions, hostile climate and environment had a crushing effect on them. The terrifying stories of deportation, never to return to the country they toiled so much to gain entry into became another kind of reality to many. If it killed many dreams it also destabilised the
concept of home. Security and warmth associated with the home slowly faded away and was replaced by a feeling of indifference and disgust. Through the observations of the boy Kiam Kim, Choy gives a moving picture of those who left with indignation and a heavy heart.

“They all come to Gold Mountain with hope,” Third Uncle said. “They work hard for ten or twenty years and leave with only what they carry back in one suitcase.”... “Why not starve and die in China?” said one old man to Father. He bent down and shook my hand and wished me well in Tin-Pot Mountain. His stumpy hand felt funny, but I knew better than to back away. Father had warned me about such hands. Old Beard had first helped to clear the forest for the railroad tracks; he lost a few fingers in the shingle mill, yet with his hooked fists he had hauled nets on salmon boats until he could do so no more. Jobs vanished from the West Coast, and jobs fit only for the labouring Chinese were the first to go. “Why not die in Toishan?” asked Old Beard. “Why not be buried back home? You remember that, Kiam-Kim. You Chinese” (Choy, All That Matters 162-163).

The stories of the Gold Mountain sojourners were sometimes of success and at times of failure. The pathos of the situation is heightened by the indifferent attitude of the Canadian government that cared little for the welfare of the immigrants who did so much for the development of their country and instead of arranging for proper rehabilitation for them in their hour of need promised only to pay for their passage back to China provided they signed a contract never to return again. The life of starvation and misery that they once turned their backs to, once again stare at the face as they had been let down by the Gold Mountain. The idea of ‘home’ becomes complex once again.

As a Diaspora community the Japanese were united in so far as their experiences as a minority community was same since they were all considered a part of the ‘yellow peril’ that polluted Canada. However within the community there were vast differences in experiences that made it impossible to categorise their experiences as a race to be homogenous. Some life stories were of success and triumph over adversities
while others of misery and crestfallenness. While many Chinese soon became wealthy and powerful in their community others were reduced to begging and some even left with no choice but to reverse their journey to China. There also was enough tension within the community itself that created divisions among themselves. This was chiefly between the different generations of immigrants all of whom wanted a slice of the gold mountain. Poy writes in *Passage to Promise* Land that:

during the 1950s, we have three different groups in the Chinese Canadian communities – the older generation from the Pearl River Delta, a younger group of new immigrants directly or indirectly from Hong Kong, and the *tusheng* who were born in Canada – each jostling for leadership, and each trying to define the meaning of Chineseness…In January 1954, a physical fight broke out between the local-born and the new immigrant youth groups in Vancouver’s Chinatown (39).

Many reasons have been attributed for this and though the local Chinese Press criticised both the older and the younger groups the inevitability of the situation can hardly be underestimated. With each group insisting on their closeness to the real meaning of Chineseness, a conflict was inevitable. The crisis and conflict in the life of the Chinese immigrant occurs both in their community life as well as in their social life. The problems faced from displacement and uprooting are more connected to the discriminations faced by them individually and collectively. The other problem that arises is within the community is based on the issue of ‘Chineseness’ and this happens perhaps due to the generation gap as also perhaps because of the glaring truth that all immigrants are essentially competitors for a slice of the coveted Gold Mountain. The Chinese in Canada in their search for ‘Chineseness’ to retain their identity actually paved the way for a new Chinese Canadian identity which was distinct from the Chinese identity they came with.
With a gradual change in identity which was a result of the long stay in Canada, coupled with the English education received by the second generation of immigrants, not to mention the fact that with the decline in immigration from China due to the Exclusion Act, the Chinese in Canada despite the severe marginalisation faced were compelled to assimilate and appropriate Canadianness in them, giving rise to Chinese-Canadian writing and Chinese-Canadian identity. The process was gradual but unavoidable. It gave rise to a new response to Canada and a new response to China. Though the first generation revered China and considered it their actual home, the desire to return was feeble. Those who were deported were sad. Among those who stayed back, most preferred life in Canada. Su-Jen’s father sang the glories of Canada but never tired of telling her tales about Chinese myths and heroes. The implication being that the Chinese preferred the positive side of life in Canada; the opportunities to learn English, to educate one self and lead a modern lifestyle but were not willing to compromise on their values or traditions. Canada was the preferred country of living while China would always occupy the space of the beloved homeland lost to the recesses of memory but always there in mind and thought.

The second generation was more unabashed about their preference for Canada acknowledging it as their only home. Their attitude to China varied from indifference towards it to ignorance about it. Stories of the difficulties of life in China that forced their parents or grandparents to leave it, reinforced their dislike for or disinterest in the country. Su Jen muses in *Midnight At The Dragon café*:

She was always talking about Hong Kong. Nothing here was as good as it was there. In the years that my mother and I had been in Canada, Hong Kong and China had for me become forgotten places. But my mother still talked about her old homes and when she gazed out the window at the near-empty streets I knew she was thinking about them (70).
To the first generation of migrants, Canada would always remain secondary to the native place, particularly to the women. The responses of the men and women have been different in some cases. *In Midnight At The Dragon Café* we have several characters with different complex attitudes to Canada. Su-Jen’s mother could never adjust to Canada. She fancied women in China to be happier than her. Su-Jen’s father fully realized the opportunities and avenues open to one in Gold Mountain. He tells his son sternly to work hard and reap the rewards that will come in good time. He believes with education a good life would surely await his daughter. Uncle Yat sacrifices his family life to remain in Canada and work (75). Su-Jen’s mother thinks uncle Yat's wife was ‘smart’ to have never come to Canada where she was unhappily ‘stranded’ (75). The women probably missed out on the traditional life at home and took longer to adjust to a new place, while the men looked ahead and saw the opportunities before them. Fong Bates writes in her autobiography that her mother Fong Yet Lan once confided in her and said that:

> Her life was like a table that had been sawn in two: one half stayed in China, the other half had been sent to Canada... I yearned to bring those stranded parts together. (Fong Bates, *Finding Memory* 26)

While the men were sensitive to the economic realities the women were guided by social and cultural and personal needs. The younger generation like Su-Jen and her brother Lee-Kung prefer Canada to China and perceive everything about it to be better than that of China.

Men and women both faced risks beyond imagination. The men had to after all find work and make a living in the country they volunteered to come to leaving their own. The reception they got at the coast or in society was hardly encouraging. Yet they
carried on. The women who mostly joined their husbands later, had their own set of uncertainties. Mai-Yee, in Midnight At The Dragon Café comes as a mail order bride with much hope. She has a grand wedding but soon finds to her horror that her husband had been sexually involved with her mother-in-law. There was no escape from this unimaginable nightmare and return to her former life was perhaps impossible. She had to accept what life offered her in Canada --- a morally depraved husband and a restaurant to run and make a living out of. Her mother-in-law, Lai-Jing was no happier. Having lost a husband and a son in China she came to Canada where she never found happiness. In giving birth to her step-son’s child she had crossed all boundaries of decency but the few moments shared with him and her daughter, other than the memories of China was all she treasured. The opportunities of good life in Canada which also implied escape from the troubled political scene of China, meant nothing to her.

Mui Lan the mother-in-law in Disappearing Moon Café is equally unhappy in Canada. When her son is married to Fong-Mei, the latter comes to Canada with grand dreams. Her elaborate wedding party becomes the talk of China, back home. Fong-Mei, however, has to live a life of shame and bitterness. Seeing her husband openly bed a stranger and herself getting drawn to her illegitimate brother-in-law whose child she bears. Canada thus becomes a site of pain and unhappiness for the women. Even if the men find satisfaction later in being able to make a good living, to the women, Canada would always mean tears, shame and sorrow.

The later generations born in Canada or brought to Canada at a young age have greater hope as with education and schooling their chances of a better life are ensured. This is why Su-Jen says time and again that her mother hoped she would do well in school and not run a restaurant but do a good job instead.
The crises and conflicts in Chinese Canadian life were therefore manifold. The humiliations, discriminations and severe marginalisation faced in society had its fair toll on the community. For a people who left a home in China under distressful circumstances to have to face numerous battles from the moment of landing on Canadian soil to almost every minute in life for mere survival is a sad story. The situation is rendered complex when the war fought with the greater enemy, the White opponent merges with a different kind of war fought within the community. Be it on the issue of claiming greater knowledge of ‘Chineseness’ or generational clashes or family feuds or even conflicts of values and traditions. Internal factions always undermine the unity of a community. Happily for the Chinese, the problem of illegal migration that raged through Canada at one point of time united them under one front and they actively resisted the Canadian government’s tactics to harass the community. Like the Japanese who showed exemplary courage and unity during the internment, the Chinese too showed they were capable of unity during a crisis.

Chinese-Canadian writing is a mirror to the long painful history of the Chinese in Canada. It is a testimony to the sufferings of the Chinese in Canada. It is also a record of the long glorious contribution of the Chinese people to the making of today’s magnificent multicultural Canada. The dull white mosaic is rendered colourful and exotic by the Chinese presence. It is a paean to the multifaceted talents and skills of the Chinese people. Chinese Canadian writing redefines Canadian history, culture and literature. It is the art of a brave and courageous people who dared to write and tread where angels have feared to tread. It is the product of a history of struggle and war for survival in Canada.

The attitude of the writers has mostly been to open to the world outside the life of the immigrant hitherto unknown. The toils and travails endured to create a
meaningful life in Canada, it has also been to expose to the world, the dilemma the immigrant has been caught in trapped between a rigid traditional culture and the harsh hostile world outside. The trauma of displacement is augmented by the chain of difficulties, emotional, social, economic or political that the immigrant is required to pass through before he can find the elusive good life. The shackles of agents and exploitative middlemen, suspicious officials and inspectors on the Canadian coast, the everyday struggles for survival, the piles of discriminatory laws and prejudices to contend with and not to mention the problems arising out of personal issues or intra-community disharmony.

Wayson Choy, Fred Wah, Judy Fong Bates and Sky Lee have been successful in capturing almost all aspects of immigrant life and the dilemma they face as they negotiate two cultures and two identities. The first generation had to make many adjustments to fit into Canadian life. The second generation had to no less. Su-Jen (Midnight At The Dragon Café) had to become Annie, the Japanese Murasaki, Muriel (The Chorus of Mushrooms), Sek Lung, Sekky (The Jade Peony) and all this to be accepted in a society they readily wished to be a part of. Canada offered her vast resources, her forests, mines and minerals and gave countless opportunities to the immigrant but seldom acknowledged him as her own.

The writers too in an attempt to build up a Chinese environment in their books perhaps fall back on the clichéd as they evoke the exotic of the east and pit it against the west. Thus the emphasis on food, superstitions, customs, beliefs, furniture, bric-a-brac and so on is so starkly evident in the books. But the irony of desiring a Chinese identity and a desire for an acceptance in Canadian society can hardly be ignored. There is a plea somewhere in the books for a recognition of the Chinese culture and the industry of the Chinese people and their contribution to Canadian society. When viewed from
this perspective, the Chinese identity and the Canadian one, do not run counter to one another but complement it or even become harmoniously infused into one. The efforts of the Chinese have helped to push forward the multicultural image of Canada.

The multiple fronts on which the Chinese community fought to be granted the franchise or to be acknowledged as loyal Canadian citizens not only stand as testimony to their strength and perseverance but also to their faith in Canada. The early immigrant came with a view to make money and return to China. The political and social scene of China and the economic and financial realities of life in Canada made the prospect of returning home quite impossible. From the very beginning the Chinese displayed their hardiness and willingness to work. Like Sekky who regretted that he could never be ‘Canadian’ enough despite all efforts, the Chinese rued that they would always be marginalised and treated differently in spite of all efforts at proving their loyalty. The crux of Chinese Canadian writing is this regret ---- that no effort was good enough to prove their ‘Canadianness’ though they were as loyal to Canada as they could be to their native country. If Chinese Canadian writing is about the Chinese in Canada it is also about the society, the people, the rocks, the mountains, the trees and the history of Canada. Ultimately, Chinese-Canadian stories are stories of human lives and the story of humanity in its struggle for survival. If the writings of Northrope Frye, Morley Callaghan, Margret Laurence or Margaret Atwood can be considered Canadian, the stories of Wayson Choy, Fred Wah, Judy Fong Bates, Sky Lee, Larissa Lai or Denise Chong is equally Canadian. They help push the boundaries of Canadian writing and take it to much higher levels. They represent an aspect of the Canadian mosaic that was hitherto silent.

‘Chinese-Canadian’ writing is actually a misnomer as it appears to only represent a narrow perspective of Canadian literature. It gives a prejudiced and partial
reality of Canadian writing. It confines the works of important Canadian citizens between brackets and prevents a deeper understanding of Canada or her people. But the writing of the Canadian citizens of Chinese ancestry is more than just the lives of the Chinese in Canada. It is about the non-Chinese as well. It is about the Canadian people, its government, its policies, its effect on different communities; it is about an essential and significant slice of Canadian life. Canadian literature is dynamic and ever expanding. To limit Wayson Choy’s works or Sky Lee’s writings to mere Chinese writing would be a gross error that would limit the growth and development of Canadian writing and literature. In all fairness, it is a plea that the so called ‘Chinese-Canadian’ be called Canadian writing as it strongly represents Canada and is a pointer to the multicultural face of Canada, the glorious receptive powers of Canada, the many faceted talents of Canada and is above all symbolic of the ever expanding, flowering, blossoming and ever growing nature of Canadian literature.
ENDNOTES


4. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


