Introduction

The term diaspora came into prominence during the last decade of the twentieth century. Writers who claimed to articulate the concerns of the diaspora have often been lauded and sometimes ruthlessly censured. An application of the theory of cultural studies in any text would reveal the power structures which are hidden under the veneer of apparently innocent discourses. The present study is an attempt to locate the border crossings in the works of select women writers of Chinese origin in America and Canada and to unravel the power structures in the works which are actually detrimental to the evolution of true multicultural societies that ensure justice for all. It also aims at making a comparison of the literatures of the Chinese diaspora in America and Canada to explore the similarities and differences. Considering the works of the Chinese Canadian and the Chinese American women writers as a representation of the Chinese diaspora in America and Canada, the study also has attempted to investigate the questions of “identity,” “space” and “voice.” The ways in which the America born Chinese (ABC) and the Canada born Chinese (CBC) react to their native cultural values, imparted and most often imposed on them have been analysed. The study has also attempted to find out how much the significance of the tropes like “China,” “Chineseness,” “American,” “Chinese-American,” “Canadian,” “Chinese-Canadian,” “Chinatowns,” “majority/minority,” “dominant/marginal,” “assimilation,” “acculturation,” “amalgamation,” “liminal personae,” etc. have changed with ethno cultural realities interacting and affecting each other. The study attempts to examine the question as to whether the contemporary Chinese
American and Chinese Canadian women writers have succeeded in creating a “space” in the mainstream American/Canadian literatures.

Studies that support and oppose the multicultural stances adopted by Chinese American and Chinese Canadian writers are available. Nonetheless, these are readings of individual works or individual writers and if at all they effect a comparison, they do not go beyond a comparison of the works by two authors. Such independent studies of the works by writers such as Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston and Sky Lee can be found in Contemporary Literary Criticism series. A study of the works of some of these Chinese American writers can also be found in the journal MELUS. Articles on individual works of some of the authors taken up for study are also available on the web. Book length series on the works by writers such as Amy Tan are available, for instance, Amy Tan: A Critical Companion by E.D. Huntley. Mari Gro Liland, student at the University of Bergen has come up with a study titled Cultural Mediations in Chinese American Literature: First and Second Generation Immigrant Writings (2002). Here she has focused on the works Fifth Chinese Daughter by Jade Snow Wong, Paper Daughter: A Memoir by Elaine. M. Mar, Bone by Fae Myenne Ng and The Bonesetter’s Daughter by Amy Tan. Studies on certain Chinese American authors is said to have been carried out by Suocai Su. The Chinese Canadian literary scenario is dealt with at length by Lien Chao in her work Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English. However, an exhaustive study that examines the essentialist ethnic paradigm and offers a comparison of the works of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian women writers has not yet emerged. Hence the relevance of this study.
Jean-Francois Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern condition as “‘skepticism towards all ‘metanarratives,’ …the supposedly universal, absolute or ultimate truths that are used to legitimize various projects,’” has set up a hermeneutics of suspicion towards grand narratives and has resulted in a proliferation of micronarratives (qtd. in Appignanesi and Garratt 103). This enabled migrant writings to gain a stronghold. Certain migrant writers who have become popular include Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharathi Mukherjee (Indo American), N.V.M. Gonzalez, Linda Ty-Casper (Filipino American), Younghill Kang, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Ronyoung Kim (Korean American), Hisaye Yamamoto, Wakaka Yamauchi (Japanese American), Louis Chu, Edith Eaton, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan (Chinese American), Alice Walker, Toni Morrison (African American), Tran Van Minh (Vietnamese American) and many others. The situation of the migrants and their descendants in Canada has been addressed by such writers as Rohinton Mistry, Himani Bannerji (Indo Canadian), Sky Lee, Denise Chong, Yuen-fong Woon (Chinese Canadian), A.M. Klein (Jewish Canadian), Austin Clarke (English Canadian) and Joy Kogawa (Japanese Canadian). Their works get reviewed all over the world and have started becoming part of the curriculum in many universities. With many of them having been officially recognised nationally and internationally, they can be said to have crossed the status of minority writers and appear to be dynamically occupied in upgrading the status of the communities they represent. However, many have been charged with the indictment that they are merely selling their ethnicity.
The writers, whose works are taken up for the present study, include Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Fae Myenne Ng from the Chinese American diaspora and Sky Lee, Denise Chong and Yuen-Fong Woon from the Chinese Canadian side. Their full length works, *The Woman Warrior, The Joy Luck Club, Bone, Disappearing Moon Café, The Concubine’s Children* and *The Excluded Wife* have been selected for study. In the thesis, the works of the above mentioned Chinese Canadian and Chinese American women writers will be analysed, applying the theories of diaspora criticism, comparative literature, narratology and cultural studies, with the intention of setting up an equation of the position of these Chinese diaspora women writers in Canada and America.

Man has always been fascinated by the differences and the similarities among literary works. Critics tend to find similarities in patterns even in works by writers who come from different cultural milieus and have had different experiences in life. They vouch that despite the apparently different experiences, there are certain commonalities in the life of man, like the experience of pain, anger, pleasure, disgust, etc. which spans across countries. This being the case, one may expect ample possibilities of such similarities and differences existing in the case of works by writers who share the experience of migration. When migration takes place from the same home land, the scope of such a comparative study also increases.

A better understanding of the works can be had by “placing” them side by side, so that the texts illuminate each other mutually (Prawer 144). This “mutual illumination” takes place in the works under consideration in patterns of
narration, genres as well as themes such as border crossings, diasporic experience, identity formation and so on.

A study of the narrative patterns in the work as well as the study of genres can throw light on the border crossings at various levels. S.S. Prawer feels that genre studies “combine literary history and literary theory in an international context” (114). As Ayyappa Paniker opines in “Roopa Padanam” (Genre Study), there are sociological, psychological and aesthetic factors underlying each genre (94). Thus the genre employed as well as the kind of narration used may throw light upon the psychological promptings that initiated these writings. In making the comparison, aspects like narrative pattern, genre and themes employed by the writers have been dealt with. ‘Thematics’ or thematology or *stoffgeschichte* is an area that warrants comparison. “Thematic studies,” according to Prawer, “enable us … to examine and contrast the spirit of different societies and epochs and those of individual talents” (102). P.O. Purushothaman considers theme to be the idea that the writer incorporates in a literary work, and which can be easily transmitted to the reader (150). Migration results in the creation of diasporic communities and results in cultural diffusion. Thus a reading applying diaspora and cultural theory becomes relevant to the present study.

Diasporic experience is largely subjective. The way in which people experience their being part of the diaspora may vary from individual to individual. Though critics have come up with ideas like negative capability and impersonality in creation, some part of the author’s self seems to be getting
filtered into their diasporic narratives. Hence a knowledge of the life of the writers becomes essential in such a study.

Hailed by Linda Ching Sledge as “a major American writer and the most formidable Asian-American writer in America’s history,” (308) Maxine Ting-Ting Hong Kingston was born in Stockton, California on 27 October 1940. She is the third child of Chinese migrant parents, Tom Hong and Chew Ting Lan. Her Chinese name Ting-Ting is from a Chinese poem and her American name Maxine is after “a blonde who was always lucky in gambling” (Feng par.5). Her elder brother and sister suffered premature death in China even before the migration of Kingston’s mother. Maxine Kingston, the America born daughter, though reticent during her early years of schooling, emerged as a bright student and even won a scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley. She graduated in 1962 with English as her major and married Earll Kingston, an actor, who had also graduated from her alma mater. Kingston obtained a teaching certificate in 1965 and worked as a teacher of English and Mathematics in California from 1965 to 1967. The decision of the Kingstons to leave the country in 1967 was prompted by the violent shape that the anti-war movement had taken, of which they too had been a part while at Berkeley. Their planned ‘sojourn’ at Hawaii on the way to Japan, however, lasted for seventeen years. It is during this “extended vacation” (Feng par 12) that Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (1976) and China Men (1980) took shape, which came to be hailed as “epic chronicles of the Chinese immigrant experience that are esteemed for their accurate and disturbing illumination of such social patterns as Asian cultural misogyny and American institutional racism” (Vedder 243).
In Hawaii, Kingston was a private school teacher who taught language Arts and English as a second language. In 1977, she became a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii at Honolulu. Currently she works as Senior Lecturer for Creative Writing at the University of California, Berkeley. She has bagged several awards like the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, the PEN West Award for Fiction, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Literature Award, and a National Humanities Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities. She also has been the recipient of fellowships like NEA and Guggenheim. She has found her space in college readers like Crossing Cultures, The Conscious Reader and Bedford Reader. She is even claimed by a Honolulu Buddhist sect as a “Living Treasure of Hawaii” (Feng par 6). Kingston has also written Through the Black Curtain (1987), Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1988), Hawaii One Summer (1998), To Be the Poet (2002) and The Fifth Book of Peace (2003). Her most recent book I Love a Broad Margin to My Life (2011) is said to contain her reflections on aging. She has also various uncollected periodic publications to her credit.

Kingston seems to establish a relationship between memory and writing. In an interview with Paula Rabinowitz, Kingston comments about this relationship: “Memory, my own memory, shows me what is unforgettable, and helps me get to an essence that will not die, and that haunts me until I can put it into a form, which is the writing” (316). Kingston proclaims to believe that the tribal memory, the family memory and the cultural memory are there in her own individual memory in the form of myths. Writing, as per what she claims, is,
however, not an exorcism of ghosts and memories, but an attempt at actualising these which had until then been only visions.

Writing, according to Maxine Hong Kingston is a very conscious process. In the interview with Paula Rabinowitz, she claims that her books are much more American than they are Chinese. In spite of having strange ‘Chinese memories,’ she considers her characters as American people and is conscious that she is “creating part of American literature” (317). She also very consciously invents new literary structures to contain the multiple and contradictory versions of the events that she narrates.

Amy Ruth Tan, the famous author of *The Joy Luck Club* wrote in the mould set by Maxine Hong Kingston. She was born of migrant parents John Tan and Daisy Tan in Oakland in California in 1952. Amy Tan’s father, John Tan, was trained as an electrical engineer in Beijing. He worked for the United States Information Service at the time of Second World War and left China for America in 1947. Amy Tan’s maternal grandmother, Jing Mei had a tragic life which looms large in *The Joy Luck Club*. The widowed Jing-mei lived in exile in Shanghai along with her daughter Daisy. Raped by the man who wanted to keep her as a concubine, Jing-mei had been ostracised by her own family. To add to the confusion, the son borne by Jing-mei was taken away by one of the principal wives of the man which led her to commit suicide by swallowing a lethal quantity of opium infused into a new year cake.

Daisy Tan’s life was also replete with tragedy. She was orphaned at an early age of nine and became the victim of an arranged marriage. The son born of this marriage died early, and Daisy Tan fled the marriage and her abusive
husband in 1949. But the price she had to pay for her escape from marriage was very dear, for she had to give up her three daughters. She migrated to America in 1949 after her legal separation from her abusive husband and there she met and married John Tan. She was to see these three daughters again only in 1978.

The couple John Tan and Daisy Tan had a son, Peter, born in 1950. Amy Tan also had a younger brother born in 1954 who was named after his father. Tan’s parents, who spoke to their children in a combination of Mandarin and English, according to Amy Tan: A Critical Companion, “continued to cling to many elements of the culture of their homeland, living an essentially insular life and socializing mainly with the members of California’s Chinese community, although their ambitions about their children included a certain degree of Americanization” (Huntley 2).

The Tan family was constantly on the move and hence Amy Tan and her brothers grew up in several Californian cities and towns and finally settled in Santa Clara. The Tans had high expectations of their children and wanted Amy Tan to become a neurosurgeon against her ambitions to become a writer. It is said that, “Like thousands of Asian Americans, Amy Tan spent her childhood years attempting to understand, as well as to come to terms with and to reconcile, the contradictions between her ethnicity and the dominant western culture in which she was being raised and educated” (Huntley 2). Being an uneasy ‘Americanised’ teenager at home and the only Chinese student in her classes, Tan’s craving for acceptance by the American society even made her pinch her nose with a clothespin for a week to make her nose Westernised. Though Tan, as a little girl, was ashamed of her mother’s Chinese dishes, she
later suffered from shame and self hate for her partial admission into the dominant culture.

Tan’s brother Peter and her father died due to brain tumors when Tan was just fifteen years old. This made Daisy Tan to revert completely “to the customs and belief systems of her Chinese upbringing for comfort as well as answers” (Huntley 5). The family moved to Europe, which to Daisy Tan was an escape from the evil of the diseased house in California. They eventually settled in Montreux, Switzerland. But this did not have the desired effect and a rebellious Amy Tan got arrested in Europe when she was only sixteen years old. Her infatuation for a German was adeptly handled by Daisy Tan and there was a clean break up.

After having graduated from the Institute Monte Rosa Internationale, a high school in Switzerland, Amy Tan relocated to America. Tan earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from San Rose University, after she got transferred from Linfield College in Oregon where she pursued a degree in English instead of the cherished medicine. Meanwhile, she fell in love with Louis De Mattei - - an Italian American and married him. Tan obtained her master’s degree in Linguistics. Dropping out from the doctoral programme at the University of California, Berkeley after knowing about the murder of her best friend, Tan worked as a language development specialist for disabled children, edited a medical journal and worked as a technical writer. She also had tried her hand at odd jobs like switchboard operator, bartender and pizza maker. Tan later became a representative minority member of various councils and task forces. However, finding the job uncomfortable, she became a full time writer.
Tan, in her capacity as a freelance writer, indulged in projects for several major corporations and even wrote a book for IBM. Not being satisfied with her work, Tan went in for therapy to learn to cope with workaholism, but discontinued the sessions after her psychiatrist fell asleep three times while she was talking to him.

Tan decided to write only works that she enjoyed. She came up with her first short story, “Endgame,” (1986) about a Chinese chess prodigy who had a difficult relationship with her strong willed and overbearing mother. The story was successful and was published in *FM Magazine* and later reprinted in *Seventeen*. However, her second attempt, “Waiting between the Trees” was rejected by *New Yorker*. But Tan was profited by her connections with the literary agent Sandra Djikstra.

In 1986, Daisy Tan had an angina which was mistaken for a heart attack. This prompted Amy Tan to decide to take a trip with her to China along with her husband. In October 1987, in her first trip to China along with her husband and her mother, she met her half-sisters for the first time. “The journey,” says Huntley, “gave Tan a deeper understanding of the two cultures in her heritage, the inevitable tensions that exist between those cultures, and the richness of her own experiences and those of her own mother as they both negotiated their way between cultures” (10).

Tan came back to America and published her first novel *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, a story of a mother who leaves behind two of her daughters in China. It is about four mothers and four daughters, and apparently talks of the gluey bonds of love that lie beneath the apparent generational conflicts. With the
success of *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan published her second novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife* in 1991, which also received accolades from critics. This novel unravels the mother-daughter bonding of Winnie Louie and Pearl Louie Brandt, a speech therapist. The successful portrayal of Winnie Louie and her daughter Pearl was followed by the juvenile fiction *The Moon Lady* (1992) which elaborates one of the stories in *The Joy Luck Club*. Tan wrote *The Chinese Siamese Cat* in 1994.

A variation of the themes treated earlier followed in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) where sisterly affection and Chinese wisdom regarding the spiritual world find expression. This postmodern novel by Amy Tan alternates between the past and the present and is set in the mid eighteen hundreds.

*The Bonesetter’s Daughter* which is also partly autobiographical elaborates on the quest for identity by an ‘almost Americanised’ daughter Ruth Young, a writer of self help books, having to deal with her mother Lu Ling suffering from Alzheimer’s on the one hand and on the other, a husband and step-daughters demanding attention. After having published the non-fictional work *The Opposite of Fate* in 2002, Tan now lives with her husband Louis Di Mattei whom she had married in 1974. Amy Tan has also authored a book titled *Saving Fish from Drowning*, which got published in 2005. Inspired by the idea of automatic writing, the work is a depiction of the trials and tribulations of twelve American tourists as they embark on an expedition to explore China and Burma.

Fae Myenne Ng’s first novel, *Bone* published in 1993, which soon became a best seller, is said to have drawn greatly from her own life experiences
as well as from stories and from the past. Fae Myenne Ng was born in 1957 and “grew up in the Chinatown of her own novel,” (Liland par 2) spoke Cantonese and helped her mother with her sewing at the Chinatown sweatshop of San Francisco. Her father, who had migrated to the United States in 1940 worked as a cook to provide for the family. Ng, who has been living in Brooklyn since 1989, worked as a waitress while writing Bone, in which she narrates her parents’ struggle in the “Gold Mountain.” For this, she bagged awards and writing grants which include the Lila Wallace – Reader’s Digest Literary Fellowship, the Pushcart Prize, a National Endowment for the Arts Award, a McDowell Fellowship and a Fellowship in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The fact that Fae Myenne Ng has received all these awards testifies to the “space” she has been able to create for herself in the mainstream American literature.

Steer Toward Rock (2008), Fae Myenne Ng's novel speaks of unreciprocated love and comes up with the story of the only bachelor butcher at the Universal Market in San Francisco.

Born in the same year as Amy Tan, Sky Lee (Sharon wun Ying), the Chinese Canadian novelist and the author of Disappearing Moon Café and Bellydancer: Stories, works as a nurse and a writer. She is the daughter of Wong Mowe Di, homemaker and Lee Gwei Chang, mill worker. A Canada born Chinese, she was honoured with the City of Vancouver Book Award and was short listed for Governor General’s Award, for her novel Disappearing Moon Café (1990). Sky Lee has her BFA degree from University of British Columbia and a diploma in nursing from Douglas College. Sky Lee has provided the text
passages for the visual series entitled *Iron Chin*. She has also associated with Asian Canadian Writer’s Workshop and is a collaborator in the anthology *Inalienable Rice*. Peter Roman Babiak observes that “In the late 1970s she joined the Maara Women’s Art Collective on Commerical Drive in Vancouver” (47). Her works have appeared in *Maara, West Coast Review, Asianadian, Time Capsule* and *Kinesis*. Sky Lee makes a feminist exploration of the lives of women in her published works. Interspersing the years in which the events in the narration have taken place, Lee tries to make her novel historically significant. Her birth in Port Alberni, British Columbia, Canada is surely behind her portrayal of Chinese Canadians.

“Sky Lee,” says Babiak, “maintains an artist’s natural suspicion of mainstream art and its commercial production” (648). Lee, who was born in the Chinatown in Vancouver, is an “out of the closet lesbian” (648). She has the Chinese Canadian writer Fred Wah for her friend. Sky Lee is the coeditor of *Telling It: Women and Language across Cultures* (1990) and illustrator of Paul Yee’s *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter!* (1983). *Disappearing Moon Café* by Sky Lee is a haunting tale of incest that runs along four generations of the Wong family.

Denise Chong, born to John and Hing Chong, was raised in Prince George, British Columbia, Canada. She was an economist in the Finance Department, Ottawa and had served as senior economic advisor to the Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau from 1980-84. She is also a freelance writer who has bagged the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-fiction (1995), City of Vancouver Book Award and Vancity Book Prize (1995) and had been
nominated for Hubert Evans Non-Fiction Prize (1995) and short listed for Governor General Award (1994). Chong managed to get mainstream attention with the publication of a single book *The Concubine’s Children: Portrait of a Family Divided* (1994) which underlines that the future of Chinese Canadian authors in Canada is not bleak. Though biographical details of the author are only scantily available, her work has been projected as the best source to know her life better. Chong married Roger Smith, a Canadian Television Network (CTV) journalist and settled down in Ontario, Canada. She also authored the books *The Girl in the Picture* (1999) about Vietnamese war and *Egg on Mao* (2009). *Egg on Mao* is the story of Lu Decheng, a bus mechanic, who, with two friends, challenged his family’s communist loyalty by despoiling a portrait of Chairman Mao during the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square.

Yuen-Fong Woon is a sociologist and a lecturer at the University of Victoria. She has authored many articles besides her novel *The Excluded Wife* published in 1988. She has been interested in conducting research on overseas Chinese. But her practical experiences have made her realise that the moving stories that she has heard cannot be included in the sociological journals. This made her write *The Excluded Wife*, wherein Woon exhibits her detailed knowledge of customs, rituals, folk songs, social and family relations.

Among the Chinese American writers selected for this study, Amy Tan focusses mainly on mother-daughter relationships in her novels, where the mother is a superstitious migrant from China and the daughter an almost ‘Americanised’ person, very much unaware of the ‘Chinese’ heritage. Maxine Hong Kingston, on the other hand tells us about finding of a voice despite East-
West conflicts. Fae Myenne Ng presents a series of conflicts among the members of a San Francisco Chinese family and their attempts to come to terms with the death of one of the members of the family. All of them explore the nuances of cultural diversity and ethnic identity. Among the Chinese Canadian writers, Sky Lee offers us the multi-generational tales of the lives and passionate love of the Wong family while Denise Chong tells us the story of her grandmother brought to America from China as a young concubine by a traveller. Yuen-Fong Woon narrates the vagaries of modern relationships and the experiences of being a grass widow—one whose husband lives abroad. These writers, despite offering a portrayal of the conflicts between generations and cultures, show the need and attempt made by the characters to transcend boundaries.

The introductory chapter of the thesis expostulates on the aims and significance of the study. It makes a review of literature in this area, lists the theories, and introduces the Chinese American and Chinese Canadian writers and their works.

Chapter one provides the theoretical framework for the study. Setting on by defining culture and its relation to migration, it explores concepts like multiculturalism, identity, ethnic groups, minorities, race, hegemonic culture, cultural resistance, subcultures and so on.

In the second chapter, multiculturalism in America and Canada are dealt with and the history of Chinese in America and Canada is traced. There is also an attempt to find out the attitude of the homeland towards their Chinese non-resident.
The third chapter attempts a study of the narrative strategies, focusing on the static characterisation and offers a critique of multiculturalism as represented in the works.

Chapter four focuses on the representation of China by characters that live in America and Canada. It explores the implications of nostalgia as represented in the works.

In chapter five, there is a depiction of the physical, economic and cultural crossing of borders by the characters. It deals at length with issues of identity and its ramifications of being and becoming.

The concluding chapter evaluates the extent to which cultural and territorial crossings of characters occur despite a proclivity of the authors to essentialise.