

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**CHINESE CANADIAN WOMEN'S  
ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCE:  
SKY LEE'S *DISAPPEARING MOON CAFE*  
BA thesis**

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**TARTU  
2021**

## ABSTRACT

While dealing with Chinese Canadian experience, the present study emphasises an idea of broader significance that the acculturation of immigrants always depends on the interaction of several cultural and social aspects. This thesis aims to provide a thorough understanding of the Chinese Canadian acculturation process on the basis of Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. The thesis focuses on the first three generations of Chinese immigrant women in Canada and tackles the factors that influence their acculturation into the host society.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two chapters and a conclusion. The introduction of the thesis presents a brief overview of Chinese Canadian immigration history, followed by a plot summary of the novel and a discussion of its importance to the Canadian immigrant literature. The literature review looks into the reception of the novel and focuses on the aspects of racial tensions, women's invisibility, resisting patriarchy and matriarchal oppression pointed out by the critics, and a classical model of acculturation. This creates a basis for the empirical part that follows.

The empirical part analyses how and to what extent these factors influence the acculturation process. As the thesis explores the experiences of four generations of women of Wong family in Lee's novel, each subsection of the analysis focuses on one or two representatives of each generation from the perspective of these aspects, and is concluded by an assessment of these women's acculturational success.

The conclusion summarises the findings of the thesis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	2
Introduction .....	4
1. Key Factors Influencing the Acculturation of the Chinese Women to Canada .....	8
1.1 Tensions Between the Chinese and the White Canadians .....	8
1.2 Invisibility of Women.....	10
1.3 Resisting the Patriarchy .....	12
1.4 Challenging the Matriarchal Oppression .....	14
1.5 Acculturation Process of Different Generations .....	15
2. The Women in <i>Disappearing Moon Cafe</i> .....	17
2.1 The First Generation - Lee Mui Lan .....	17
2.2 The Second Generation - Chan Fong Mei .....	19
2.3 The Third Generation - Suzanne Bo Syang Wong and Beatrice Li Ying Wong.....	22
2.4 The Fourth Generation - Kae Ying Woo .....	26
Conclusion.....	30
References .....	32
Resümee.....	34

## INTRODUCTION

I have a misgiving that the telling of our history is forbidden. I have violated a secret code. There is power in silence, as this is the way we have always maintained strict control against the more disturbing aspects in our human nature. But what about speaking out for a change, despite its unpredictable impact!". (Lee 1990: 180)

This is how Kae, a third-generation immigrant character in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, weighed the idea of finally acknowledging the Chinese Canadian immigrant story that had been swept under the carpet before by a nation that did not want them. Speaking up for a change, as a representative of the Chinese women that had suffered before her, she gives voice to those who had been silenced by the hostile host society and by the repressive Chinese traditions. This thesis explores exactly the experiences of the silenced women as portrayed in Lee's novel.

The first Chinese who came to Canada over 200 years ago were a modest group of 50 settlers, who accompanied Captain John Meares in 1788 in order to help build a trading post and boost trading (Chan 2019: para. 1). With the start of the Fraser River Gold Rush in the 1850s the first settlers were followed by a fresh wave of Chinese immigrants. These Chinese men came to Canada in order to work on the trans-Canada railway and to offer their work force in the mines (Chan 2019: para. 10). Although the Chinese saw Canada as a "gold mountain", a place of opportunities and money making, they were not interested in assimilating. The white Canadians, despite needing the workforce, treated the Chinese with racial prejudice, which turned them hostile towards the Oriental people. This hostility towards the Chinese and the segregation from the rest of the society lasted for more than 100 years, as the Chinese immigration to Canada was finally fully opened in the 1960s (Peepre 1990: 75).

In order to counter the massive influx of Chinese immigrants, starting from 1885, the government implemented a set of laws, which also included the gradually growing Head

Tax, aiming to restrict the arrival of new immigrants from China. This affected the already out of balance ratio of Chinese men and women, lessening the amount of immigrating women even more. According to Peepre (1999: 75), there were 17 000 Chinese immigrants in Canada by 1885, but only 160 of them were female. By 1911, when the Chinese Canadian population consisted of 27,831 individuals, the sex ratio was 28:1. With negative attitudes towards the Chinese from the beginning of their immigration, it does not come as a surprise that this separation and unacceptance by the rest of the Canadian society has produced a basis for Chinese-Canadian literature that deals with themes such as rejection, invisibility and lack of recognition that authors such as Sky Lee have taken upon themselves to tackle.

Sky Lee, born as Sharon Kwun Ying Lee, is a Canadian novelist who writes feminist fiction and non-fiction. So far, she has published two novels and has contributed to several other literary works. Despite the small number of publications, Lee is considered to be an important representative of the Chinese Canadian literature. Her first and best-known novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe (DMC)* was published in 1990. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is a family saga that follows the lives of a Chinese Canadian immigrant family and renders the Chinese Canadian immigration experiences through fiction. The four generations of the women of the Wong family Lee Mui Lan (1<sup>st</sup> gen.), Fong Mei (2<sup>nd</sup> gen.), sisters Suzanne and Beatrice (3<sup>rd</sup> gen.) and Kae (4<sup>th</sup> gen.) must all face the somewhat similar problems of isolation, racism, cultural clashes and family dramas, of which some have been passed on through generations, almost as a family curse. The fourth generation finally manages to break free from the bounds of silence, but it only happens after three generations of suffering. The novel starts off with the arrival of the family patriarch Wong Gwei Chan to Canada. His story of arrival is followed by a chronologically jumbled retelling of the lives of the Wong family members, with a heavy focus on the female counterparts. Kae, the youngest

representative of the Wong family, retells the family history and how the Wong dynasty came to an end due to inbreeding and lack of male heirs.

Chao refers to Yee calling Lee's novel "a milestone", because this novel "will lead the way for other Chinese Canadian writers to break the code of silence" (Romell 1990: 59 quoted in Chao 1997: 93). It was one of the first Chinese Canadian novels and has therefore been an important contributor to contemporary Canadian literature, because it gave voice to those who had been silenced before. Literary critic Cho (2017: para. 2) has said that via this book, Sky Lee was "telling stories that busted injunctions of shame and silence" and that this novel "was a book that knew the risk and cost of what it means to tell such stories, and it did so with care and tenderness". This novel has also been important for the Canadian mainstream society, as it opened up a world for them that had previously been ignored and looked at through the veil of prejudice.

While most of Canadian immigrant/multicultural fiction focuses on displaying the first contacts with Canada and its environment, the *DMC* does not quite fit under that category. Birk and Gymnich (2016: 524-525) have identified the second type of Canadian literature - "fiction of immigration and settlement". This type focuses on the relationships between Canada and its non-dominant immigrants. Settling was denied for the non-dominant groups and one of the major contributors to that was the erroneous "sojourner hypothesis" by which it was believed that the immigrants are not there to stay but are only passing by. Despite the attitude, many immigrants from China, Japan, Africa, etc. managed to make Canada their new home, their experience generating a basis for the fiction of immigration and settlement. Passing on the immigrants' stories is not the only merit of novels such as *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.

In addition to the importance of the narrative, what is also significant is the theoretical literary value of said novel, which requires us to look past the plot itself and focus on what

it has been built upon. Helms (2003: 45) contends that *DMC*'s accomplishments are largely achieved as a result of Lee's narrative strategies. Language is clearly an important aspect of *DMC*, and the reader is constantly reminded of it via the various Chinese expressions and curses that have been roughly translated into English. Lee's usage of language was to mirror the mentality of "us" and "them". As for the structure, the novel consists of forty-nine sequences, all of which have been grouped into a prologue, seven larger chapters and an epilogue. The sequences are titled by corresponding years and the names of characters from whose point of view we see the events unfolding. There are also a few sequences that have been written as phone calls, letters or a telegram. However, the characters themselves do not tell their stories - it is Kae who retells us these stories, based on what she knows and what she has heard from the others. Kae's interest in her matrilinear history has created fertile grounds for tackling specific aspects that are a part of that history. However, there has been no comprehensive study on the connections between the aspects that shape the female Chinese immigrant experience across several generations. This thesis will fill the gap in previous research on Lee's novel and demonstrate how these aspects entwine within the collective acculturation process of the Wong family women.

The present thesis explores the acculturation experience of Chinese Canadian women, based on Sky Lee's rendering of it. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the acculturation process, the following research question has been formulated: How do the complexities of acculturation manifest themselves in the experience of the four generations of women in the Wong family? The literature review delves into the different factors that literary critics have found in *DMC* and the empirical part is going to analyse how these factors manifest themselves in the lives of the different generations and influence the women's acculturation.

## **1. Key Factors Influencing the Acculturation of the Chinese Women to Canada**

*Disappearing Moon Cafe* is a novel which, through certain fictional and non-fictional aspects, addresses and displays the various challenges that the Chinese Canadian immigrants have had to face. Incidences of racism, cultural clashes, isolation, incest and search for one's identity along with Sky Lee's depiction of them has provided scholars with numerous themes and issues to address and further dwell on. There are four central topics, which include racial tensions, women's invisibility, resisting patriarchy and matriarchal oppression that have caught the attention of literary critics interested in Lee's writings. The aim of discussing the work of these literary critics is to form a background and a basis for the analysis that follows.

### **1.1 Tensions Between the Chinese and the White Canadians**

Canada has been and still continues to be a popular destination of immigration. Unfortunately for the numerous immigrants, the English and French mainstream society has not been overly open-minded towards the various immigrant cultures. When it comes to the Chinese immigrants, the white Canadian reception strategy of them, in Berry's terms (2005: 31, 33) was "exclusion" and "segregation". The Chinese were separated from the rest of the society and marginalized. Since the Chinese counterparts were considerably cold and indifferent towards actual assimilation, they chose to stay separated. Although Canada is widely multicultural today, it was not like that during the early days of immigration. The reasons for it are discussed below.

Kallen (2004: 77) sees multiculturalism as a mosaic, where people of different ethnicities are represented by puzzle pieces that together form a whole. She also attracts attention to an underlying assumption that comes along with this 'mosaic ideal' - the individuals representing various cultures can and will stay true to their heritage while being tolerant towards other people's culture and heritage. Upon closer inspection, a conflict is



clearly present between the underlying assumption of Kallen and the attitude of the Canadians of English/French descent to the Chinese. Thinking back to the first generations of Chinese Canadian immigrants, this unacceptance of each other's heritage and culture becomes painfully evident, because neither counterpart wanted to have anything to do with the other. The rejection and discrimination by the white Canadian society, is what led to the appearance of Chinatowns.

Chinatowns were usually nested on the outer, more unwanted parts of the cities. For the Chinese, it was a place that reminded them of home, and offered them shelter from the hostility of the mainstream Canadian society. The Chinatowns as a whole had a bad reputation among the white settlers as well. Ng (1999: 2) notes that the Chinatowns were seen as lawless and "morally pestilential" places where people dealt with prostitution and opium dens could be found everywhere. These biased preconceptions largely stemmed from the lack of knowledge and fear that the white Canadians had about the exotic, Oriental cultures. The Chinatown society tended to be filled with secrets because secrets ensured survival. This is supported by Davis (2008: 125), who has said that for the first immigrant generations, secrecy and keeping quiet were paramount, but for the following generations, the silence was seen as something that needed to be overcome.

Despite the Chinatowns and the white Canadian society seeming to be two completely different worlds, encounters between the corresponding representatives still happened. Although rare at the time, relationships between Chinese men and white women were present as well. Calder (2002: 15) calls these women "demonesses". In the patriarchal Chinese society, this intermingling was a threat to their pure Chinese lineage, as there were several cases of Chinese men having children with Caucasian women. Although Calder approaches the issue from the male point of view, the threat was obvious for women too. It would be a disaster for a mother or a potential future wife, if the man preferred a white

woman, because that would disrupt the family lineage and be a disgrace in the eyes of the whole Chinatown due to the racial tensions between the Chinese and the White Canadians. Women clearly felt insecure about their position, which leads to the following theme in Chinese Canadian literature.

## **1.2 Invisibility of Women**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada, the Chinese were one of the most ill-treated minorities. By forcing them to live in the suburban areas of towns, the White Canadians gave a clear sign of not wanting to acknowledge the presence of the Oriental immigrants. They were confined between the borders of Chinatowns and Calder (2002: 8) has noted that if there were any Chinese attempting to expand their businesses outside the Chinatown borders, they were “greeted with anti-Chinese legislations, hysteria, violence and even riots”. She has further commented that the Chinese labourers also suffered from ill-treatment when it came to payments as their employers refused to pay them more than half of what they paid to the white employees. There was nothing that the Chinese could do about it, due to their disadvantages in legal terms and their being disfavoured among the mainstream society. Consequently, the whole Chinese minority was rendered as invisible and they were treated as nothing up until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, invisibility was not a curse that was imposed only by the white society. It was a notion that also spread within the Chinese community. China has always been a nation where the community has more significance than an individual does. Collectivity and community were central for the Chinese, and that mentality came along with the immigrants to Canada as well, taking root in the local Chinatowns. But this collectiveness or “the collective self” as Chao (1997: 89,95) has called it, did not limit itself by just one generation or just one social class. Chao approaches “the collective self” as a shared historical identity

that affects the Chinese Canadians to this day. The memories and experiences of the first generations have also affected the current generations and are a part of their identity.

Without understanding their cultural history and experiences, the newer generations of Chinese Canadians struggle with creating their own identity. The present-day generations are unable to gain a respectable position in the white mainstream society if the collective history of their ancestors is not accepted as part of Canadian experience (Chao 1997: 93). This invisibility of the Chinese race and individuals within the Canadian society and the Chinatown society is particularly evident in the case of women. This concept was voiced by Condé (2002: 245), who claimed that Lee's women have been "cursed with invisibility". However, this was not just the curse of Lee's women, but the curse of numerous women of the first generations of Chinese Canadian immigrants. This invisibility stemmed from the isolation and loneliness that the women had to deal with once they arrived in Canada. Having come from a culture, where women supported each other a lot to a place where everything was new and strange along with the lack of women to lean on often had terrible consequences for mental health.

These consequences have been briefly touched upon by Peepre (1999: 79) as well. The women were not supposed to show their suffering to the people around them and being forced to keep it all bottled up inside was something that left them permanently contorted. The suffering, as mentioned before, did not limit itself with just one generation of women though, and therefore, it affected the following generations as well, all the way down to the fourth generation. From there on, the women started regaining their voice and visibility. Nonetheless, the suppressed emotions and isolation from other women were not the only causes of women's invisibility. In addition, it was also heavily affected by the cultural type of the Chinese, which was patriarchal at the time and therefore contributed to the invisibility of women, who in that society were considered inferior and therefore inclining towards

invisibility. The aspects of the patriarchal society will be discussed in the following subchapter

### **1.3 Resisting the Patriarchy**

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century China, which is the era that corresponds to the setting of *DMC*, was characterized by a male dominated society. Men were the ones providing for the family, the ones who were at the head of the family and they generally had more influence in social situations. Women were often objectified and their value was often questionable. Peepre (1999: 75) while mentioning the extreme patriarchal rule of the time, has pointed out that “women were considered a worthless baggage and were treated accordingly”.

However, there was a way for women to earn some respect, but it came with sacrifices. In patriarchal societies, carrying on the family lineage, especially the male side, was of utmost importance. Therefore, producing heirs was important to men and it was regulated by society. Women could gain authority and respect once they had produced children to their husbands, especially if the children were male. But women’s reproductive abilities were what also led to them being objectified. Bought marriages were popular in the Chinese society and they were often arranged by the parents. This method was also used to get women to Canada. Goellnicht (2000: 305) points out that the women who were bought to be the wives of Chinese Canadian men, were seen as a liability until they could produce children. This was due to the Chinese Exclusions Acts, according to which no new women could be brought to Canada. However, this demonstrates that if a woman were to be infertile, she could simply be discarded, because in the eyes of the patriarchal society, she had no value or worth without her reproductive ability. What is worse is that the wife was always to blame when there were no children, even when the problem lay in the husband. The

possibility of there being something wrong with the husband was simply not considered or people pretended that the problem just did not exist.

If one were to think that the women were happy with this patriarchal society, they would be wrong. Not all women tried to fight the patriarchy and those who did sometimes did it unknowingly. Committing adultery is a conscious act against the patriarchal expectations. Addante (2002: 206) demonstrates that women fight patriarchy by taking back control over who they want to be with and to have children with. This act of rebellion did not come without consequences. The closed off societies within Chinatowns and the unbalanced ratio of Chinese men and women in Canada created convenient conditions for incest as there was little to no fresh bloodlines. As it is further discussed by Addante (2002: 202, 207), incest stops the flow of exchange, which is a subversion of “patriarchal continuity” and therefore, the women do not pass on the male heritage, but rather have it trapped. These means of defiance present themselves within the second and third generation of the Wong family in *DMC* as well.

As for the fourth generation that is represented by Kae, her resistance to patriarchy appears in a slightly different, more particularized form. She decides to become a writer and wants to pursue her matrilineal heritage for inspiration. The act of choosing to only focus on the matrilinear side is an act of rupturing the patriarchal culture, emphasizes Addante (2002: 211). Kae’s career as a writer is also touched upon by Condé (1998: 240), who remarks that Kae’s triumphant female characters are opposing the patriarchy simply by giving a voice and an importance to women. Goellnicht (2002: 315) adds that Kae’s sexual orientation defies patriarchy as well, because lesbian relationships oppose the patriarchal culture. However, patriarchy is not fully in control as behind the curtains, certain matriarchal aspects come into play as well, which will be elaborated on in the next subsection.

## 1.4 Challenging the Matriarchal Oppression

Within the Chinese society, older people, especially one's parents, are to be respected. Moreover, the Confucian codes of filiality and obedience are what make the children obey their parents and do by their bidding. This is a system that worked well back in China, but in Canada, things are different. However, this does not mean that parents would not try and continue the same tradition. As Canada is a completely new environment and the first Chinese immigrants do not intend to stay there, they are extra focused on maintaining their Chinese-ness and their own lifestyle. Unfortunately, this backfires for the women, who no longer have a proper, close-knit support group of other women and it results in a flurry of negative emotions, bitterness and cruelty. The foremothers' behaviour, the negative attitudes and emotional distance from their children creates a gap of knowledge between mothers and daughters, reveals Condé (1998: 244). The Chinese mothers' occupation back in China was mothering their children and passing on knowledge and ancestral wisdom which is clearly lacking among the Wong family.

While a slight distancing and a rejection of the mother figure is considered normal in mother-daughter relationships, according to Peepre (1999: 77, 84) the rejection of the mother figure in *DMC* has been magnified and exaggerated to an unhealthy point where the daughter figure does not just reject the mother, but she also rejects the motherland. Peepre (1998: 81) called this notion "demonizing the mother figure". The process of becoming a "demon" for their daughters starts when the first generations of women cannot acculturate successfully into the mainstream society and this inability results in feelings of displacement, invisibility and loneliness. But since the women are supposed to remain quiet, these feelings fester inside and turn into hatred and violence that the mother-figures take out on their daughters in the form of physical beatings and cursing. Since the daughters are unable to fully understand their mothers' experience, which is accompanied by the maltreatment, it only worsens the

relationships. This cycle of violence and silencing is eventually broken by the fourth generation, who finally dares to give voice to the sufferings of these women. One can only assume what kind of a mental challenge it must have been for the women while living in a hostile society, especially because acculturation by nature, was not meant to be easy.

### **1.5 Acculturation Process of Different Generations**

Already Hansen (1938: 5-6) describes how and why immigrants can be seen as a 'problem' - the reason being that they need to adjust to the culture of the destination country. If there were no influx of new people, this obstacle would eventually disappear. However, as the arrival of new immigrants does not stop, there are always going to be those people who are labelled as immigrants. Evidently the lack of willingness to accept the differences between the Canadian and Chinese cultures together with the restricted yet continuous inflow of new Chinese immigrants and the problems coming along with it are what make the acculturation process that much more complicated for the Chinese.

Significantly, the difficulties do not limit themselves to just the first generation, as in the case of the first generation of immigrants Mui Lan and Fong Mei in Lee's *DMC*. According to Hansen's (1938: 7, 9) classical three-generation pattern of immigrants' acculturation, the second generation of immigrants often struggles with family pressure, expectation and a need to get away, while the third generation struggles with pinpointing their own identity. The new immigrants, who still hold on to their homeland and who now need to adjust to new surroundings find themselves in what Peepre (1999: 73) calls a "border zone" by which she refers to the gap between two cultures that the immigrants inhabit during the period of accommodation. In order to acculturate, the immigrants need to change their worldview and traditions so that it would sync with the new environment. Peepre (1998: 79-80) further elaborates on the term 'border zone' as a space of "double subjectivity" by which she means that the immigrants are still being "accountable to and influenced by" the various

places they are connected to concurrently and “battle to retain their heritage culture while adjusting to the strange, new host culture”. She also notes that the first-generation immigrants within the “border zone” struggle with “loneliness and alienation” while the second and third generations look for and try to understand their roots and traditions (Peepre 1999: 74). In Lee’s novel, the second immigrant generation is represented by sisters Suzanne and Beatrice, while the third is represented by Kae.

It can be concluded from the literature review that the first generations did not plan to stay in Canada, as they were there to earn money and therefore, they were not interested in acculturating, but instead keenly tried to maintain their own culture and traditions to an extreme degree. The overwhelming grip on traditions resulted in factors, such as resistance to patriarchy and matriarchal oppression among others, that strongly affected the identity crisis and acculturation struggles of the generations that eventually settled in Canada. To find out in which ways and to what extent the previously discussed aspects and notions are being expressed and how they influence the acculturation process of the four generations of the Wong women, an analysis of the novel is conducted in the empirical part of the thesis to follow.



## **2. The Women in *Disappearing Moon Cafe***

The aim of this thesis is to explore the complexities of acculturation and how they manifest themselves in the experience of the four generations of Wong women. The analysis seeks to identify to what extent and how the factors of racial discrimination, invisibility of women, resistance to patriarchy and matriarchal oppression influence their acculturation experience. Each character analysis concludes by determining the degree of her acculturation in terms of Peepre's "border zone". Each subchapter analyses the experience of one generation of women. The first two subchapters of the following analysis are devoted to Lee Mui Lan and Chan Fong Mei, respectively, who represent the first generation of immigrants and whose experiences include similarities but also important differences. The third subchapter focuses on two sisters, Beatrice Li Ying Wong and Suzanne Bo Syang Wong, who represent the second generation of immigrants and while their challenges are partly the same, their lives take divergent paths. The fourth and the final chapter focuses on Kae, a third-generation immigrant who breaks down and seeks to voice and understand the experiences of her foremothers as well as herself.

### **2.1 The First Generation - Lee Mui Lan**

Lee Mui Lan is the wife of Wong Gwei Chang, a merchant who came to Canada already during its "gold mountain" era. They got married as strangers back in China and Gwei Chang left for Canada six months later. The next time they saw each other was sixteen years later, when Mui Lan followed him there (Lee 1990: 27). However, this was only the beginning of Mui Lan's burden of loneliness. Having strayed away from her husband emotionally, she could only rely on him for her status in the new Chinese Canadian society.

Having come from a very traditional, close-knit society, the situation for Mui Lan is very different in Canada. She has to survive in a foreign environment without the support of

others, because there are no women to lean on, as she would have done back in China, because there simply are very few of them in Canada at the time, and her husband is too distant from her, so no emotional support could be expected from him either. In this new environment, Mui Lan found herself to be invisible. Condé (1998: 245) believes that it is the loneliness that makes her invisible. Most people do not want to be invisible. They want to be seen and heard. This is the case with Mui Lan as well: “/.../the only way she could come back [become visible again], was by being nose-y and demanding /.../” (Lee 1990: 27).

Having grown up in a traditional, patriarchal society, she felt the need to carry on the customs in Canada as well. Mui Lan became a relentless enforcer of the patriarchal values and expectations, the need for traditional continuity exaggerated by her loneliness. Addante (2002: 206) speculates that Mui Lan does not seek for “genuine closeness” with other women, as her main goal is to simply ensure an heir to her family, and she “becomes an accomplice to the patriarchal order which subjugates and exploits women because of their reproductive function”. Invisibility only amplified the need to assert her position and control over those around her. These emotions of loneliness, uncertainty and resentment towards acculturation were bottled up inside her, corrupting her. In her head, Mui Lan had a vision of how things should be, and every shift away from her vision of perfection, she fought with violence and malice. The disturbance in Mui Lan’s mind needed an outlet, and she took it out on the one she thought had failed her the most - her daughter-in-law. From Mui Lan originated the matriarchal oppression that dug its claws deep into the generations that followed.

An important part of Chinese women’s lives is taking care of children. Children are essential for carrying on the family legacy. When Mui Lan’s son got married, children were to be expected, but when that did not happen, Mui Lan’s worry grew into obsession. “She wanted a grandson to fulfil the most fundamental purpose of her life. /.../ A little boy, who

came from her son, who came from her husband, who also came lineally from that golden chain of male to male. The daughters-in-law who bore them were unidentified receptacles” (Lee, 1990: 31). Mui Lan felt obliged to take matters into her own hands and the pressure that came with it turned her into a tyrant. She became an embodiment of a “demon mother” as Peepre (1998) would say. The aim of Mui Lan’s smouldering rage was to crush and destroy her daughter-in-law as she believed her to be the reason for not having any grandchildren. Threatening, cursing and beating her daughter-in-law was no rare occasion for Mui Lan. Desperate to have a grandchild, Mui Lan even went to great lengths by finding her son a mistress. However, once Fong Mei, her daughter-in-law, did provide her a granddaughter, Mui Lan’s resentment towards her did not disappear. She found a new outlet for it and continued to nag and complain about Fong Mei’s way of doing things, expressing her feelings through cursing and beatings when Fong Mei did not live up to her expectations.

Peepre’s (1999: 73) “border zone” notion expresses itself in a cruel and vicious form with Mui Lan. While she should be trying to adjust to the new and foreign environment that she is in now, she is hell-bent on asserting her position and traditions as they were back in China without making any compromises. Having lost the position she had back in China, Mui Lan creates herself a new identity that is based on the patriarchal expectations to an extreme. She fails to leave the “border zone”, because she does not even try to leave as she cannot acculturate into the host society and attempts to live her life the way it was back in China.

## **2.2 The Second Generation - Chan Fong Mei**

Chang Fong Mei is the daughter-in-law of Mui Lan, who was brought to Canada as a “paper bride”, someone who was bought to be a bride. While she was happy and delighted to Come to Canada, her first experiences on foreign territory were described by nothing but

racial discrimination. Detained and questioned in a dingy prison by the immigration officers for days, Fong Mei began to call them “white devils” (Lee 1990: 43). As she heard the stories about other women being raped and saw them being dragged away by the officers, Canada became a hateful, hostile place for her. She disliked the white Canadians and Canada itself and carried this hatred for them within her for the rest of her life. Fong Mei also wanted to go back to China, however she was not able to stay there.

Upon her arrival in Canada, Fong Mei now belonged to the Wong family and by tradition was to leave her former life behind. She had not met her new family before. Her husband was a stranger who slept in her bed and her in-laws did not show any desire to get close to her. Fong Mei was expected to be the perfect daughter-in-law: obedient, cheerful, tireless and quiet. For five years she had to endure the bullying by Mui Lan, who could not forgive the fact that Fong Mei had had no children. Believed to be barren, she was constantly beaten and cursed by her mother-in-law. Condé (1998: 245) reveals how the bullying left her nothing but an empty translucent shell, making her invisible. The bullying reached a climax, when Mui Lan threatened to send Fong Mei back to her family - the act of sending a bride back was considered to be the greatest disgrace on her family. To add to her humiliation, Mui Lan offered a second solution: Fong Mei’s husband was to have a child with a mistress, and the child was to be raised by Fong Mei as her own. Be as it may, these threats, on the contrary to Mui Lan’s hopes, did not break Fong Mei, but in fact, gave her something to fight for, a way to ensure her position.

Tired of the oppression by patriarchal values, Fong Mei commits adultery and has illegitimate children out of wedlock, which undermines the patriarchal values of Confucian tradition and intervenes with the family bloodline, that should be carried down the male side of the family. However, it is not adultery alone that represents Fong Mei’s resistance towards patriarchy. Addante (2002: 206) elaborates that by choosing to commit adultery, Fong Mei

took back the power over her body and sexuality that had been lost for her, as she was bought as a bride, and gives herself to a man of her own choosing. Women choosing their partners was a taboo and unheard of in the Chinese society at the time. She clearly contradicts the marriage traditions (despite not getting married to the man she had children with) and allows herself to choose who becomes the father of her children. Considering that Fong Mei had three children altogether, it is likely that her husband was infertile, but the family would not admit the fault on the male side. Fong Mei's ability to reproduce, highly valued in the society, became her weapon to fight against the injustice and exploitation of women. However, she did not pass on her rebellion to her children, as she proceeded to raise them by the patriarchal traditions.

Born in China and raised in the light of deeply rooted patriarchal traditions, Fong Mei could not raise her daughters differently. Having had to struggle so much in order to secure her position and silenced by her gained luxury (Conde 1998: 246) Fong Mei hoped she could ensure her daughters a better marriage than she had been given. Without realising it at first, Fong Mei became what she had despised.

*I forgot that they were my children! I forgot that I didn't need to align them with male authority, as if they would be lesser human beings without it. /.../ I was given the rare opportunity to claim them [her children] for myself, but I sold them, each and every one, for property and respectability. (Lee 1990: 189)*

In this case, however, the selling is more metaphorical, as Fong Mei's daughters were never sent off. Although she spoiled her daughters when they were younger, the situation changed when they reached a ripe age for dating.

The matriarchal oppression paradoxically made a full circle when Fong Mei's own children became the victims of it. The dark secret of her adultery paid her back when her daughters wanted to marry their supposed half-brothers (Fong Mei's lover had other children). The fear of her secret being revealed and losing control over her daughters' life expressed itself in violent beatings and cursing. The conflicting maternal emotions were so

strong, fuelled by the dark secret, that they eventually grew into hatred towards her daughters: “In front of her eyes, the image of fear on her baby’s face still swam, after Fong Mei had slapped with all her might, again and again, wanting to kill. /.../ Yes, she would rather see her dead” (Lee 1990: 149). Fong Mei became a literal demon mother, in Peepre’s terms (1998), who lost her daughters in the process: one of them grew distant and the other, due to a cruel twist of events, killed herself. So Fong Mei lost her daughters, much like was traditional at the time, but her punishment was having to watch her only surviving daughter live her own life, while she herself suffered from loneliness.

Within Peepre’s (1998) “border zone”, Fong Mei has not taken any steps towards acculturation. Despite being in Canada, the closed-off Chinatown society keeps her from being directly influenced by Canadian culture and she herself does not try to pursue it due to her own negative experiences upon arrival. Although having taken a few steps towards Canadian ‘freedom’ with her rebellion towards Chinese standards, she remains in the first stages of the border zone and does not try to advance, as she hopes to one day return to China.

### **2.3 The Third Generation - Suzanne Bo Syang Wong and Beatrice Li Ying**

#### **Wong**

Beatrice and Suzanne were the two daughters of Fong Mei who did not experience racial prejudice and discrimination like their mother had. While there had been some minor changes in the attitude towards the Oriental people, there were still many who resented the Chinese and Beatrice got a first-hand experience of it.

*/.../ she was not only refused a scholarship but also entrance into music at University of British Columbia. They said that her English marks were not good enough /.../ that stinking old man, who was supposed to be the head of the department couldn’t even look at Bea without hate oozing from every pore. Pure envy and jealousy that a mere girl, and chinese to boot, should be so gifted. (Lee 1990: 201-202)*

On the other hand, Suzanne's experience with white Canadians could be considered much better, putting aside the fact that she met them while giving birth to a child who was going to die. ".../ Dr. Pastega gave me hope. That one look of concern on her plain round face was good medicine. Her crisp, confident tones made me feel human again" (Lee 1990: 204). The doctors and nurses treated Suzanne and her deformed baby with utmost care and sympathy, showing that the Chinese were as much human as they were, giving hope that one day, the Chinese could be accepted in Canada.

Having become a detectable flicker in the eyes of the white Canadian society, Beatrice and Suzanne remained invisible in the eyes of their own family. Beatrice was spoiled rotten. She was sent to "one of the best British-run young ladies' finishing academies in Hong Kong" (Lee 1990: 139) and treated as a princess by her mother, Fong Mei, who was quite obviously preparing her for a prestigious marriage. This upbringing, built upon outside perfection, came with consequences. Beatrice turned to solitude and detached herself from the outside world as much as she could, as she was already treated more like a doll, rather than a human being. Conde (1998: 245) states that the life of luxury made her invisible, as her inner world carried no meaning.

Suzanne's invisibility took a darker, more extreme form. All her life, she had put up a show in front of her parents, behaving as a good, obedient daughter, and her true personality and thoughts were kept hidden. Her life took a turn for the worse when she got pregnant out of wedlock, and as it turned out, the father of the child was her half-brother. The baby, who was born with deformities, died shortly after his birth. The Wong family, not wanting to bring attention to the incestuous situation wanted to sweep it all under the carpet and simply act as if nothing had happened. The death of her child, knowing she had partaken in incest, and the treatment by her family, resulted in depression. Her suffering went unnoticed by those closest to her, as Suzanne tried her best to hide it: "It's details like that which give you

away, you know! [forgetting to put on stockings when going to meet people] Disguise, I thought, is an act of war” (Lee 1990: 211). Unable to recover from the situation mentally, she was having feelings of “failed maternity, of the female body failing to reproduce the male heir that would give her life legitimacy in a patriarchal society” (Goellnicht 2000: 316). Suzanne was driven into a mental breakdown, which concluded with her suicide. She committed suicide, becoming truly invisible once and for all (Conde 1998: 245). As suicide was considered to be an atrocious taboo in traditional Cantonese societies (Goellnicht 2000: 301), her sufferings were turned invisible after her death, because it was played off as if she had died of a sickness.

Suzanne’s suicide carried a secondary meaning as well, a form of resistance. Having failed to produce a legitimate male heir according to the expectations of the patriarchal society, instead of trying to fix her ‘mistake’, Suzanne takes back the control over her body, and decides to free herself from the constraints of patriarchal society and destroys the vessel, her female body, which otherwise would be a tool for patrilinear continuity. Suicide was not her only form of rebellion. Suzanne chose her own partner, despite the fact that her elders were strongly opposing it. By Confucian traditions, she should not have had any say in it at all, and her partner should have been chosen by her parents. Moreover, although unknowingly, she partakes in incest. As Addante (2002: 202) noted, incest is a distorted overthrowing of patriarchal continuity and stops the flow of exchange. Beatrice’s form of rebellion was somewhat similar to that of her mother and her sister. She chose to be with a man, who was at first not accepted by her mother, largely due to the suspicions of him being her half-brother. Her further resistance towards the patriarchy took a more biological turn, as she only gave birth to one child, a daughter, and therefore put an end to the Wong family name, as her daughter, Kae, inherited the last name of her father.



One could argue that the greatest suffering of Suzanne and Beatrice stemmed from their foremothers, who both had taken their bitterness and misery out on each other and their daughters, passing on the matrilinear oppression. In her daughters, Fong Mei had only seen tools for her own success as she simply used them to catch the attention of wealthy businessmen, in order to gain useful relationships for herself. Her behaviour was so apparent, that even her daughters figured it out:

She never cared about us. She never loved anything but money. I hated her for all the years of dressing us up like monkeys and telling us to behave like good little girls in front of fat men and their high and mighty wives because it was good for business. (Lee 1990: 202)

The sisters had to endure beatings and curses as well, whenever things did not work out the way Fong Mei had planned. Due to the demonic treatment by their mother, Beatrice grew distant from her. The distance between them resulted in consequences that showed even in the following generations. Mothers were traditionally expected to pass on knowledge and wisdom to their daughters, however, in this case, the emotional distance between Fong Mei and Beatrice resulted in a gap of knowledge within the collective self of the family. As for Suzanne's death, Fong Mei is largely the one to be blamed for it.

Positioning Beatrice and Suzanne into Peepre's "border zone", it becomes evident that the two sisters have taken more steps towards acculturation than the others. Although she gets rejected, Beatrice makes an attempt at getting out of their Chinatown society as she tries to start studying at the University. Based on that it could be speculated, although it is never mentioned, that Beatrice could already speak English. Out of her family, Beatrice most likely is the only one that manages to acculturate into the mainstream society. Suzanne had potential to perfectly acculturate as well, as she always desired to get away from her family and live her own life. Leaving her family behind like that would have been a large step towards acculturation and leaving the border zone

## 2.4 The Fourth Generation - Kae Ying Woo

Kae, the only daughter of Beatrice, is the representative of the fourth generation of the Wong family. By the time of Kae's adulthood, which started somewhere in the 1970s, the racial tensions between white Canadians and the Chinese had begun to die down. While giving birth to her son in a hospital, Kae receives excellent healthcare, however it is evident that within her family, there is still some racial prejudice left. They are cheerful and pleasant when the nurses are watching, but "when the pink nurse turns away, the other [either Kae's mother, or mother-in-law, who were standing by] examines every inch of her back as if she were very alien" (Lee 1990: 21). From this observation by Kae, it becomes evident that she herself is comfortable and does not mind the white people around her. Further evidence of her generation being more accustomed to the mainstream society, is that Kae does not speak Chinese very well. Condé (1998: 248) however claims that Kae only seems to be successful in being a Canadian, because she portrays a Chinese identity, which she does not actually understand.

Kae's search for identity shines through throughout the whole novel, as she tries to understand her family history. She seeks knowledge about her female ancestors in order to establish an authentic identity for herself (Chao 1997: 102) as her connection to China is not as strong. However, she is deeply interested in her family history and tries to find out as much as possible. By retelling the stories of her family, Kae reaches an understanding that her own identity is closely linked to those of her family members. In a scene, where Kae imagines ghosts and living people discussing their stories, an image of her friend, asks Kae:

Do you mean that individuals must gather their identity from all the generations that touch them - past and future, no matter how slightly? Do you mean that an individual is not an individual at all, but a series of individuals - some of whom come before her, some after her? Do you mean that this story isn't a story of several generations, but of one individual thinking collectively? (Lee 1990: 189)

Since this scene was made up in her head, Kae actually asks these questions from herself, and contemplates her own development of identity. While storytelling, Kae realizes

that all her foremothers have been forced into silence and their struggles have been invisible. So Kae takes it upon herself to give these women a voice. While Chao (1997: 93) explores the collective identity as something that only affects the younger generations, it could be argued that in fact, it works both ways. The older generations left her traditions, family history and the aftermath of family drama, Kae in turn could give them validity, visibility and voice by bringing them out of their invisibility.

Giving these women a voice, presented Kae with purpose and means to fight the patriarchy that had oppressed her foremothers so much. Addante (2002: 211) and Condé (1998: 240) remarked that it was Kae's career as a writer that opposed the patriarchy. Choosing to focus on the female side of the family and making these women victorious is a direct blow to the male-centred society and undermines its core values. Kae's newfound freedom as a woman, in a generation that is not single-handedly controlled by Chinese traditions anymore, also gives her complete control over her sexuality. Despite getting married and having a son, Kae eventually pursues a lesbian relationship, which Goellnicht (2000: 315) notes to be another form of defying patriarchy. Understandably so, as lesbian relationships completely rupture the patriarchal values, by effectively removing the male counterpart from the equation.

Having dealt with the patriarchal issues, Kae could not quite escape the consequences of matriarchal oppression either. Essentially, Kae who wants to understand her foremothers fails to do so, as she cannot fully fathom their experience as the circumstances have changed. Whenever told to follow some family traditions or behave 'properly', Kae attempted to be perfect in order to portray her Chinese identity. In addition, the matriarchal clashes of the past have resulted in a distance between Kae and her mother, Beatrice. Condé (1998: 244) concludes that "Kae is hopelessly divided from her mother, Beatrice; /.../ there is no sense that there is a bridge forming, or that Kae is learning from her mother". She is also spoiled,

much like her mother was, as Beatrice most likely did not know how else to raise her. The chain-reaction of Mui Lan and Fong Mei abusing their daughters left Beatrice with an inability to form a close relationship with her daughter. These disrupted family relations and emotional distance created a gap of knowledge, which becomes most evident, when Kae is unable to take care of her three-week-old baby and expects her mother and old nanny to come and take care of the situation. While Kae never encountered the full-blown experience of the demonic mother-figures, the effects of their deeds reach far into the younger generations as well. Even though the Wong family has resided in Canada for four generations, they have not been able to recreate the supportive female community that they had back in China.

In the light of Peepre's "border zone", Kae is positioned near the end of the zone. She has become the free daughter, who is able to make her own decisions and live her life as she pleases. However, she is also affected by the "double subjectivity" (Peepre 1998: 79-80), because she is simultaneously affected by her Chinese lineage and the Canadian mainstream society. As a writer, she became a public figure that in the eyes of the mainstream culture, represents her Chinese roots. Although inclining more towards the Canadian counterpart of her, as she freely communicates and moves within the cultural sphere, along with practically not speaking Chinese, her acculturation is not complete. The deep desire within her to learn and understand her heritage eventually takes her to China. She does not get through the border zone, but simply leaves it and goes to the country of her ancestors and her heritage culture.

As the above analysis has shown, the experiences of the Wong women include similarities and considerable differences. What is similar between the two representatives (Mui Lan and Fong Mei) of the first immigrant generation is that they both are hell-bent on

asserting their position within the family and they both suffered from extreme loneliness. They both also became oppressors to their daughters, however the reasons behind it were different. In addition, neither one of them could nor wanted to acculturate. Discrepancies appeared in their attitudes towards the patriarchal society that had been a norm back in China.

The experiences of the second generation (Beatrice and Suzanne), although portrayed by two sisters, were also rather different. Putting aside the family tragedy, the differences displayed themselves within the sisters' attitudes towards family relations. While Beatrice followed most of the traditions, Suzanne wanted to get away from her family and be on her own. However, on the contrary to the first generation, the sisters showed signs of wanting to acculturate. The third generation (Kae) stood out on its own, showing the most signs of acculturation and ability to be welcomed into the host society, while still being strongly interested in the family legacy.

Putting these experiences into Hansen's (1938) classical depiction of the generational acculturation process proves to be a little difficult. While Hansen (1938: 7) claims that the second generation struggles with expectations from the host society and their family respectively, it is evident that these struggles do not apply to the second generation of Chinese Canadian immigrants, as their society was still rather closed off from the host society. This reflects Peepre's (1998: 79-80) "double subjectivity" and is in fact a strife of the third generation. However, Hansen (1938: 7) also insists that the second generation wants to escape the family, which applies to the second-generation immigrant Suzanne. The third generation in Hansen's (1938:11) words, is interested in looking back; they want to learn more about their roots and understand their history, which is in accordance of Kae's, the third-generation immigrant's, experience.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis has been to take a look into the Chinese Canadian acculturation process of the first three generations from women's perspective through analysing Sky Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Leaning on the findings of literary critics who have tackled this particular novel, four main factors that affect the acculturation process, emerged. These factors included the racial tensions between the Chinese and the mainstream society, the invisibility of an individual within their own society, restrictive characteristics of the patriarchal Chinese society and matriarchal oppression, which came to the fore in Canada.

These factors proved to be closely related to each other as they could almost be considered a chain reaction. The hostile relationships and attitudes between the Chinese community and white Canadian society, excelled at keeping the two apart during the most crucial times of acculturation. As a cause and effect reaction, the Chinese were isolated from the rest of the society, which made acculturation difficult for them, as they had no way of learning the new customs. However, they were isolated and unseen within their own community as well. The immigration regulations placed on the Chinese complicated their inflow and disrupted the male to female ratio, pushing it out of balance. The imbalanced proportions strongly affected the male and female relationships, as there were much more men than there were women.

The scarcity of women resulted in female loneliness, as they had no support groups around them. This along with acculturation difficulties produced an extreme desire in the first generations to implement the patriarchal norms that had previously been a norm. As it went to excess, it created a resistance towards these customs by the younger generations who expressed themselves in various forms of rebellion. Remarkably, this defiance against patriarchy resulted in matriarchal oppression by the mother figures, who struggled with asserting their own position in this new Canadian environment. The struggles were not

limited to the first generation, as the consequences of strife and struggles surfaced in the experiences of the following generations as well.

The first generation, including Mui Lan and Fong Mei, struggled with finding a healthy balance between forming close relationships with their daughter-figures/daughters and maintaining the patriarchal customs, while attempting to recreate their own identities. Unfortunately, they were unable to find a healthy balance, which stripped the second generation, among whom are Beatrice and Suzanne, of a chance to present their true selves, leaving them with hollow shells, trauma and distorted relationships. To some extent, the first and second generations passed their own trauma on to the third generation, where the modern, third-generation Chinese Canadians, such as Kae, had to find a way to identify themselves while carrying the weight of past ordeals. All the while, the younger generations had to learn to live alongside the host society, which was not overly accepting.

While the unwillingness to settle down hampered the acculturation process, these four factors mentioned above slowed it down and complicated the process even further, to a point where a fourth generation Chinese Canadian had still not acculturated to Canada. These aspects that undermined the Chinese Canadian acculturation and the underlying connections between them, had not been comprehensively studied before, but the present thesis has filled that gap. Although the immigrant experience of the Chinese greatly contrasted with the experience of other minorities, their acclimatization did not differ too much from the classical take on immigration. If anything, the Chinese in their acculturational development are simply behind by a generation.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Gerli Täpsi**

**Chinese Canadian Women's Acculturation Experience: Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe***

**Kanadahiinlannade akulturatsioonikogemus: Sky Lee *Disappearing Moon Cafe***

Bakalaureusetöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv: 34

Annotatsioon:

Töö eesmärgiks on uurida kanadahiinlannadest immigrantide akulturatsiooniprotsessi. Töö põhineb Sky Lee romaanil „Disappearing Moon Cafe“ ja käsitleb Wongide perekonna naiste nelja põlvkonna kogemusi. Kirjanduskriitikute varasema retseptiooni põhjal on loodud nii teosele taust kui ka ära määratletud põhifaktorid, mis mõjutavad kohanemisprotsessi ning millele on üles ehitatud töö empiirilises osas olev analüüs. Kirjandusülevaade on jaotatud viieks alapeatükiks, millest igaüks käsitleb erinevat akulturatsiooniprotsessi mõjutavat faktorit. Ka empiiriline osa on jaotatud alapeatükkideks, millest igaüks analüüsib ühe põlvkonna kogemust. Töö keskmes on neli faktorit: rassiline diskrimineerimine, naiste nähtamatus, vastuseis patriarhaadile ja patriarhaalne rõhumine. Iga tegelase käsitlemisel uuritakse, millisel määral ja kuidas need faktorid nende kogemuses avalduvad ning kuidas need on akulturatsiooniprotsessi mõjutanud. Analüüsi käigus selgus, et kõik väljenduvad faktorid on omavahel tugevalt seotud ning võimendunud tänu Kanadasse immigratsioonile. Lisaks selgub, et ka nelja põlvkonna jooksul ei ole suutnud Hiinast tulevad immigrantid täielikult integreeruda Kanada valgesse enamusühiskonda.

Märksõnad: kanadahiinlannad, akulturatsiooniprotsess, kultuuridevaheline kommunikatsioon, kanadahiina kirjandus, patriarhaalne ühiskond.

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