

**James Frederick Wah and Other Chinese-Canadian Writers:
A Comparative Study**

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Abstract

Multi-cultural countries provide us a chance to rethink on issues such as race, ethnicity, identity, language and colour consciousness which are very important to determine the racial or national identity. Canada is a land of different cultures; several racial and cultural people can be seen there. In such countries specially people, who came from inter-mixing of race and culture, could not easily claim their identity. From that point of view Fred Wah is considered as a notable writer by his culturally mixed background. He questions it and justifies himself through racial differences. He proclaims as he is Chinese-Canadian. Like Fred Wah there are many more writers having ethnic, racial, and cultural differences. These differences lead us to raise questions of self-identity, nationality and the problems to maintain the double-ness. So we have to compare other Chinese-Canadian authors with Fred Wah to find out differences and similarities.

Keywords: Fred Wah, Ethnic and racial differences, distinctiveness, hyphenated subjectivity, and representation of self- identity.

Introduction

According to Tara Lee, a Canadian writer, the Chinese Canadian literature has occasionally questioned “the myth of stable identity reproduction.” Speaking even from racial differences she says that like other mixed literature, Chinese Canadian literature has its rich genetic issue. We can find such issues from the prose or poetry of outstanding Chinese Canadian writers.¹

Chinese-Canadian literature offers a variety of genres which have been used to recognize, inquire, and assemble racial issues. These are widely discussed in the various texts of other Chinese Canadian writers like Fred Wah. Different identities are explored especially in

multicultural families, which have the genetic, racial and cultural differences as distinguishing characteristics.

Genetic interests and trends have been explored recently in Chinese-Canadian literature. We find different types of genres to recognize and mobilize the racial issues. We need to study genetic issues (blood, race, color, lineage) to see how these help us to locate and place the literary and individual identities at the same time we encounter that how such genetic issues and approaches appear as problematic. From all these distinguish characteristics, Chinese Canadian literature seems us outstanding and diverse literature.

Sky Lee's *Disappearing moon cafe*, Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish girl*, Jude Fong Bates *Midnight at the Dragon café*, Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*, Vincent Lam's *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures*, Jen Sookfong Lee's *The Better Mother*, are six books which represent identity and mixed racial issues through various characters and describe and explain to us genetic interests.

For my discussion I have taken three significant writers: Sky Lee is a third-generation Chinese-Canadian writer. Her book *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is very important to discuss various issues in relation to Fred Wah's works. Judy Fong Bates is also another prolific writer of Chinese-Canadian writer. Her book *Midnight at the Dragon Café* helps readers to understand situations and issues which were represented during her times. One more Chinese-Canadian book *Salt Fish Girl* helps us to understand how she (Larissa Lai) represents her thoughts like hybrid images, pictures and characters. So these three books are vital to discuss and find similarities and dissimilarities between Fred Wah and these three (selected) Chinese Canadian writers.

This paper aims to trace out the differences, distinctiveness, similarities among these writers and aims to achieve and prove that Fred Wah is an outstanding and global writer.

Objective of the Study

In this section main objectives are to find how Wah justifies his identity through hybrid nature which is created by him in his writings and also how we can differentiate these writers by their different style of writing and approach to the issues.

- 1 How Fred Wah looks at identity and how he posits his national identity.
- 2 Like Wah how other Chinese Canadian writers are important for racial and/or national identity.
- 3 How can we consider him as an outstanding intellectualwriter?

4 How Wah stands extremely different by his way of presenting compared to other Chinese-Canadian or Asian Canadian writers.

5. How Wah writings try to keep change the mindset of the readers and lead them to keep change on perspectives.

6 How he defines and justifies him by his ideological perspective and lenses.

Research Methodology

Comparisons and Contrasts between Fred Wah (in *Diamond Grill*) and Sky Lee (in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*).

We can see the comparison between Fred Wah and Sky Lee being the Chinese Canadian writers. Both have represented the Chineseness. We can look the similarities through their actual presentation of language, race, and customs. But Wah traces out his mixedness; throughout his writings he expresses his different attitude towards his self-identity by his father side Chineseness. But both are represented in their distinct style of writing. In Wah's writing, he reveals his family (cousins) blood relationship with Chinese; all of them got married to Chinese. Wah also discloses his Chinese root of his father. We can observe here there are a lot of similarities between Sky Lee and Fred Wah in the representation of Chineseness in their writings.

We can observe most prominent thing in both writings, "the use of ginger". Wah's father always prefers to use ginger in his cooking. He does not want to cook without ginger. Like that Sky Lee also mention the use of garlic water in this novel through the character of Kae Ying Woo. We come to know that Chinese always prefer ginger for their use. At the same time how the father was running Chinese restaurant/cafe named *Diamond grill* Like that great-grandmother of Kae Ying Woo, Lee Mui Lan also managing cafe such as *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.

The crisis of identity arises in both Wah and in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*. Wah himself raises the issue of identity regarding his self, and Sky Lee presents the identity crisis through many characters. Some themes are same in both novels like running cafe, immigration, but in some cases both writings are quite different.

Fred Wah and Judy Fong Bates

Fong Bates is a significant writer among the Chinese Canadian writers. *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe* is one of the notable novels of Judy Fong Bates. The novel is set in 1960. It reveals the story of the young girl named Su-Jen, who is the daughter of a small Ontario town's introverted Chinese family.

Judy Fong Bates investigates Chinese immigrant experience in Canada in her novel *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe*. She narrates her immigrant experience from China to Canada. Fred Wah illustrates his father's migration from Canada to China. But Judy Fong illustrates the story of the girl named Su Jen and her reunion with mother to her father. We can find the contrast here because it is a migration act from China to Canada (Toronto).

Fred Wah narrates the story of his father's immigration, his cooking style, cafe and his grandparents. Most importantly he talks about his different attitude towards identity, and he feels happy to be too white. He negotiates such issues in his writing. But Judy Fong Bates moves her novel kindly towards the meeting of the family and how the daughter and mother joined Hing Wun at the beginning. But similarly both Wah's father and Fong's character Hing Wun were running cafes for their earning. Running of cafes was most passionate and popular in those days. The picture of the 'Swinging doors at the kitchen' is the identical issue in both in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill cafe* and *Fong Bates Dragon Cafe*.

In both the novels, we may observe that both governments of China and Canada imposed conditions on people to leave and return. In Wah father's case, the Canadian government did not allow him to cast his vote when he returned to Canada from China. This shows the government attitude towards the migrated people. When we come to the case of Su Jen's family before the Second World War, the communist China government strictly imposed conditions on people. People were worried about the communists but after the Second World War as Judy Fong Bates says the communist government changed its mind and allowed many families to come over to their native land. So as a researcher I would point out that before the Second World War people did not have a choice and chance to leave the country easily. They had to follow what the government had instructed. But after the Second World War things had changed by the changed mind of government and people were able to breathe easily.

Fred Wah and Larissa Lai

Larissa Lai is also one of the notable writers of Chinese-Canadian literature. She also talks about migration movements, hybrid nature and pictures in her novel *Salt Fish Girl*. The title itself suggests the hybrid names and images. In her novel we can also find some similarities and contrast issues when compared to Fred Wah's writing. Throughout the novel, we can identify the strategies of hybridization and a number of composite images and spaces associated with the characters portrayed by Larissa Lai.

In this novel, the characters like a salt fish girl, Miranda, Nu Wa the shape-shifter, and Evie show their ambiguities, conflicts and contradictions about their living. At the same time, these female characters reveal the positions of women in society. Here also we can find the similarities and contrast to Fred Wah regarding the identity or hybridization of characters

towards identity crisis. Even Wah also talks about crisis of identity even as Larissa Lai talks about crisis of identity. This is a common theme which they have discussed in their novels.

But Larissa Lai writes about working classes in the factory, women's position, and social hierarchy which are the issues not spoken largely by Fred Wah in his writings. He focuses only on his ethnicity, identity, immigration, Chinese ancestry, food pattern of his family. Even when comparing Larissa Lai to other south Asian Canadian writers like Mistry, Salvatorian and Shani Mootoo, these writers are popular partly because they depict racism happening in faraway places but not in Canada. Wah explores his racial and ethnic issues through his Chinese lineage. Taking up the issue of immigration of his father and family, Wah talks about his dual identity, but Lai introduces the characters through the hybrid identities within the power structure and hierarchical social society.

Conclusion

When we talk about Fred Wah and other three Chinese-Canadian writers we come to know their way of representation of characters. This research paper gives an account of comparisons and contrasts between three writers and Fred Wah's writing.

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