

explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

The Multiple Dimensions of the Journey Motif in SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990)

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DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.18.6.2

Abstract. *Disappearing Moon Café* explores the idea of identity through the eyes of a young woman, Kae Ying Woo. By means of letters, stories, and memoirs, Kae Ying Woo travels back in time to discover the history of her family and, through that, her own identity. Yet, she constantly encounters secrets and silences which hinder her journey, making it even more strenuous to find the answers to the questions haunting her. However, the travel through time is not the only motif of journey present in the novel as Kae's journey to discover her family history is paralleled by her psychological journey to understand herself. Through non-linear narration and multiple character perspectives, SKY Lee also presents to the modern readers the different journeys of Chinese immigrants: firstly, the physical journey from China to Canada and later a more metaphorical one, the end of which is rediscovering their identity in the new environment of the Canadian society.

Key words: diasporic literature, SKY Lee, motif of travel, Chinese-Canadian literature

1. INTRODUCTION

Robin Cohen describes diasporas as communities of people who, despite living in one country, “retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its location, history and achievements, [...] believe they are not – and perhaps can never be – fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate [...] and continue in various ways to relate to that homeland” (2008, 6). The emphasis on collectivity and the communal act of maintaining an emotional bond with one country while living in another is particularly important for diasporic identity as it creates the sense of connection between those of similar ethnic background (McLeod 2000, 207).

In her book *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah states that “at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey” (2005, 179). Yet, diasporic journeys are not ordinary journeys as they do not focus merely on the linear movement from one point to another, but rather on the notion of settling down and rooting oneself in a new

environment. Each diaspora is, in fact, a great web woven from multiple distinctive stories of travel, which is further transformed into one main narrative of a diasporic journey serving as a cornerstone for the diasporic identity (Brah 2005, 180):

these multiple journeys may configure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. It is within this confluence of narrativity that 'diasporic community' is differently imagined under different historical circumstances. [...] The identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively.

Therefore, the stories of individual journeys from the old country to the new one create the sense of shared history.

The prominent role of a journey in diasporic communities is reflected in the literary works created by their members. The motif of a journey is often employed by the diasporic writers to discuss the desire to return, either physically or metaphorically, to the abandoned homeland. The motifs of a psychological journey and time travel – usually taking the form of a genealogical journey – are also used as the starting point for the discussion of the diasporic identity, its development, relevance, and complexity. The aim of this paper is to show how the motif of a journey is interwoven into the auto/biographical narrative of *Disappearing Moon Café*, the debut novel of a Chinese-Canadian author SKY Lee.

2. THE MOTIF OF TRAVEL IN DIASPORIC LITERATURE: HOME, GENEALOGY, AND IDENTITY

One of the most popular motifs appearing in the diasporic literature is that of returning home. The idea of 'home' is associated with a shelter, a sense of security, and the feelings of comfort, belonging, and being welcomed (McLeod 2000, 210). However, in the diasporic context, the understanding of 'home' is twofold (Brah 2005, 189):

On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sound and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day... all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. [...] The question of home, therefore, is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances.

Hence, in the recent years the idea of 'home' transformed from being solely the place of origin or the place of settlement to a local, national or transnational place, a virtual community, or a collection of experiences and social relations (Cohen 2008, 10).

The first diasporic definition of ‘home’ refers to the idea of imaginary homeland – a home, distant both temporally and spatially, to which one can return only through an act of imagination (Rushdie 1991, 10). Such a home is merely a nostalgic image constructed from fragmented memories and existing only within the shared consciousness of the diasporic community; therefore, it is seen as a factor contributing to the feelings of displacement, rootlessness, and non-belonging. In this context, creating the narratives describing the experience of returning home becomes the only way of satisfying the otherwise impossible-to-fulfil desire.

Meanwhile, the local dimension of the diasporic notion of ‘home’ is often affected by the generational differences among the migrants. As Brah (2005, 190) notes:

the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was recently left behind, and by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to reorientate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities.

The descendants of migrants, although left without first-hand knowledge or memory of their distant homeland, are often still not permitted to fully belong to the host culture, experiencing similar sense of non-belonging and displacement as their parents and grandparents did. As a result, the members of the diasporic community are living in the ‘in-between’ area of non-belonging (McLeod 2000, 214). Yet, McLeod (2000, 214) highlights that such a state of in-betweenness also has a positive side:

[living in-between] shows that [...] the conventional ideas of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ [...] no longer seem suited to a world where the experience and legacy of migration are altering the ways in which individual think of their relation to place, and how they might ‘lay claim’ to lands that are difficult to think of in terms of ‘home’ or ‘belonging’. Instead, new models of identity are emerging which depend upon reconsidering the perilous ‘in-between’ position [...] as a site of excitement, new possibilities, and even privilege.

This position of living in-between two cultures provides the new generations of migrants with an insight into the intricate web of power relations affecting them and other members of their community. As a result, the new generations start to forge and create new narratives in which the motif of travelling back home is transformed – it is no longer used only as a way to satisfy the desire of belonging, but also as means to approach the ideas of home, rootedness, and identity from a more critical perspective. Therefore, the use of the motif of journey begins to reflect the idea that “identity is always plural and in process, even when it might be constructed or represented as fixed” (Brah 2005, 191). McLeod describes this new idea of identity using Paul Gilroy’s terms of *roots* and *routes* – instead of having secure roots fixing them within a given nation or ethnic group, the members of diaspora create ‘routes’ characterized by “transnational contingencies” (2000, 215).

The complexity of the migrant or diasporic identity can be explored through auto/biographical narratives, a genre which gains popularity among the diasporic writers. In her book *Relative Histories: Mediating History in Asian American Family Memoirs*,

Rocio Davis notes that as diasporic life writing – or auto/biographical writing – aims at explaining and understanding the immigrant cultures, it focuses on family stories which present and illustrate the intersection of various generational and cultural issues (2011, 2). Moreover, immigrant auto/biographies “focus explicitly on individual processes of understanding identity” (Davis 2011, 2) which often take the form of an introspective psychological journey – and, in some cases, even a physical journey to the land of ancestors – triggered by the family stories passed from one generation to another.

A form of an auto/biographical narrative which is particularly interesting in the exploration of the diasporic literature is a family memoir, defined as a “narrative or film that inscribe[s] the story of at least three generations of the same family” (Davis 2011, 3). This form of an auto/biography focuses equally on the author and their family and promotes the idea of collective memory through the (re)production of the biographies of the author’s relatives and the inclusion of historical and geographical elements specific for them. In such narratives, “the relatives are historical actors, and the author carefully situates [their] forebears in their social, cultural, political and economic context” (Davis 2011, 3) to highlight the passage of time.

Davis argues that auto/biographical writings are becoming essential in the exploration of not only the family relations existing within diasporic communities, but also the migrant identity of their members:

[an] auto/biography has gained important scientific and academic ground as a valid source of negotiating with the past. [However,] life writing can be not only a potentially productive source for a nuanced reconstruction of the past, but also a valuable document for discerning processes of identity. [...] [It is] a privileged way to access personal and collective forms of subjectivity in changing contexts. [...] Identity is not only shaped by the stories we have been told, but also [...] by the stories we tell. [Therefore,] the act of writing one’s story affirms as it performs identity. (2011, 45)

It is not surprising that, in the case of diasporic communities, the majority of family memoirs focus on the historical events which motivated families to emigrate, the process of adaptation or assimilation they had to undergo, and the use of different strategies of representing the ethnic subjects within the host culture (Davis 2011, 6).

3. THE MOTIF OF A JOURNEY IN SKY LEE’S *DISAPPEARING MOON CAFÉ*

Born in 1952, SKY Lee is a Chinese-Canadian author, artist and feminist from Port Alberni, British Columbia (Kich 2000, 197). Lee, who describes herself as a lesbian and a Maoist, is a member of the Asian Canadian Writers Workshop, a group which aims at “challeng[ing] racial discrimination in Canadian society and the political power that endorsed it” (Chao 1995, 147). Apart from *Disappearing Moon Café*, Lee edited the anthology of Chinese-Canadian writing *Many Mouthed Birds* (1991) and in 1994 she published a volume of short-fiction entitled *Bellydancer: Stories* (Kich 2000, 201).

Lee’s debut novel, *Disappearing Moon Café* can be described as a memoir of the fictional Wong family spanning from 1892 to 1986. Although the main narrator of the novel is Kae Ying Woo, a young Canadian of Chinese descent, the events taking place in

Vancouver Chinatown – where the eponymous Disappearing Moon Café is located – are shown through the eyes of her numerous ancestors, starting from the patriarch of the family, Wong Gwei Chang. Yet, the main focus of the novel is the stories of the Wong women: Lee Mui Lan, Chang Fong Mei, Beatrice Wong, and Suzanne Wong. The mosaic composition of the novel, resulting from constant shifting between time periods and speakers, ensures that only after finishing it, the readers will be able to recreate and fully understand the history of the Wong family.

The novel includes references to important events in the Chinese Canadian history. The first of those references is present as early as in the prologue where Wong Gwei Chang ventures into the mountainous region of British Columbia to retrieve the bones of the Chinese workers, so they can be sent back to China to be buried. The Chinese workers in question died during the construction of the Central Pacific Railway. The novel also mentions the introduction of the so-called head tax which forced the Chinese migrants to pay \$50 before being admitted into Canada; the tax was raised in 1900 to \$100 and in 1903 – to \$500 (Chao 1996, 237). Moreover, the Canadian authorities described the Chinese immigrants as nonassimilable and perceived them as undesirable; as a result, it was only in the 1950s when the Chinese immigrants could obtain citizenship rights in Canada (Chao 1996, 237).

Another historical event affecting the Chinese diaspora in Canada and included by Lee in her novel is the introduction of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923 which effectively stopped Chinese immigration to Canada – according to the official records, only eight Chinese immigrants entered Canada between 1924 and 1939 (Anderson 2007, 25). The introduction of the Act led to a sex ratio imbalance as almost all of the early Chinese immigrants were male laborers (Chao 1996, 237). This disproportion, in turn, resulted in the further isolation of the Chinese community which looked at the host culture with distrust: “since 1923 the Chinese Exclusion Act had taken its heavy toll. The rapidly diminishing Chinese-Canadian community had withdrawn into itself, ripe for incest” (Lee 1990, 147).

Finally, Lee refers to the proposed introduction of the so-called Janet Smith Bill of 1924. In the aftermath of the suspicious death of a young white nursemaid, “the British Columbia Legislature debated whether to ban the employment of white women and “Oriental” men as domestic servants in the same household” (Kerwin 1999, 83). As the bill was motivated by eugenics and racial biology, its introduction would “sentence the whole race of the Chinese to be seen as criminals by legitimizing the existing racial discrimination and segregation” (Chao 1996, 243). In the novel, Wong Gwei Chang leads the Chinese community as they successfully boycott the bill while, at the same time, preparing for the fallout of the new wave of discriminatory and prejudiced laws.

The historical events presented in the novel visibly affect the characters and influence their relationships with others (both within the Chinese diaspora and outside it). Moreover, they also fuel their desire to travel, either externally (to return to China to escape discrimination) or internally (to discover their identity and sense of self). This article focuses on three types of journey present in *Disappearing Moon Café*: a physical journey, a genealogical journey, and a psychological journey.

3.1. PHYSICAL JOURNEY

The motif of a physical journey in *Disappearing Moon Café* can be further subdivided into three categories: a journey from China to Canada, a journey from Canada to the United States, and a journey from Canada to Hong Kong.

There are four characters whose journeys from China to Canada are mentioned in the novel: Gwei Chang, Mui Lan, Choy Fuk, and Fong Mei. Like many other Chinese men, Gwei Chang comes to Canada for economic purposes – he simply wants to earn enough money to support his family back in China. Hence, when he is chosen by the Benevolent Association to retrieve the bones of the Chinese workers strewn alongside the Central Pacific Railway, he hesitates as the mission, while prestigious and socially rewarding, is dangerous and badly-paid:

he was strolling down a street in a wealthy residential area of Victoria. He knew it was a street where rich people lived, because it was lined by fine old trees at neat intervals in front of each sprawling lawn. And he was troubled because he was about to turn down a job as a servant in one of these grand houses in order to go on a dangerous, almost senseless expedition. Not only was it going to be grueling hard work, but the pay was a bad joke. Of course he knew that the rewards for the performance of such work would come later, but his family in China needed to eat now. (Lee 1990, 6)

In the end, Gwei Chang, in the act of solidarity with his fellow Chinamen, accepts the mission which sets him on another journey – the journey through wilderness of British Columbia.

Mui Lan, Gwei Chang's wife, and their son Choy Fuk, travel to Canada to be reunited with Gwei Chang and become one of the founding families of the Chinese community in Vancouver. However, upon their arrival, Mui Lan notices a great discrepancy between her expectations and the reality of life in Canada – she is thrown into a completely foreign environment and deprived of her support system of female company:

One day, Mui Lan received the first indications that she and her boy were being sent for, and she became the brightest centre of attention. [...] It was like being chosen by God himself. [...] In this welter of woman-sounds, Mui Lan was at her happiest. Propelled by women who could only dream of such a reunion with their men, she landed in the Gold Mountains, full of warmth of hope. Little did she realise that people's most fervent hope can turn into their worst nightmares. And Mui Lan's nightmare was loneliness. She arrived and found only silence. A stone silence that tripped her up when she tried to reach out. Gold Mountain men were like stone. She looked around for women to tell her what was happening, but there were none. By herself, she lacked the means to know what to do next. Without her society of women, Mui Lan lost substance. (Lee 1990, 26)

Lonely and isolated, Mui Lan is forced to rely on her distant husband as she tries to relocate her identity; as a result, she is robbed of her individuality and becomes recognized only through her husband: "She was simply the mother of Gwei Chang's only son. Stamped on her entry papers: 'A merchant's wife.' A wife in name only, she relied

heavily on him for her identity in this land [...]” (Lee 1990, 28). The hardship of life in Canada transforms Mui Lan into a cruel and controlling woman, terrorizing others with her attachment to traditional values and customs.

Finally, Fong Mei travels to Canada with the sole purpose of becoming Choy Fuk’s wife; the only thing that is expected of her is to give birth to a son and ensure the preservation of the Wong family name. However, when after five years of marriage Fong Mei still is not pregnant, she is viciously attacked by her mother-in-law, Mui Lan:

“[I] spared no expense to ensure you ‘get happiness’ and bear a boy—or even a girl—to my son? You’ve eaten our best food, had all the required medicines. I’ve sent gifts, and money to have incense burnt at the temples at home, to have amulets made. I’ve even risked our reputation to send you to that dead, immoral, white doctor-specialist. All without results. You have no future. You’re no good! [...] The past five years, you have learnt and worked a good deal. [...] But no matter how much you do, you have done nothing until you have given a son to us. [...] A Fuk would need to divorce you [...]. (Lee 1990, 60-61)

Yet, because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Mui Lan cannot afford bringing another Chinese bride for her son; instead, she forces Fong Mei to accept that her husband is going to take a mistress with whom he will sleep until the son and heir is born. As Fong Mei, just like Mui Lan before her, is deprived of any support system and unable to readjust her identity, she submits herself under her mother-in-law’s iron rule until she becomes strong and independent enough to free herself.

The second type of a physical journey present in the novel is the journey from Canada to the United States. Morgan Wong moves from Vancouver first to San Francisco and then to New York to escape his past – his difficult fatherless childhood, the memory of Suzie and their child, and the budding relationship with Kae – and start anew: “Morgan had told me he was going to San Francisco, but maybe even that proved too close to home. From there, he headed back to Columbia University, which was where he had come from when I first met him” (Lee 1990, 161). However, his attempts to forget what happened in Vancouver prove to be futile – Morgan still feels guilty about Suzie’s suicide and the death of their child and starts to drown his feelings in alcohol.

Kae, pushed by the desire to solve the mystery shrouding her family, follows Morgan to New York. Her journey begins as an adventure, a trip made on a whim and fueled by the need to see the man with whom she is infatuated; it is also a way of escaping responsibilities awaiting her at home:

One day, I was looking at my [car], gleaming and waxed, its bath water still steaming off the driveway, thinking about the long, hot, empty summer. Thinking about university in the fall. Thinking about going out to find a summer job that would look good on my resume. I got in and backed it out of the driveway. Driving it out on the open highway was such a pleasure, I discovered sheer ecstasy in the car’s hypnotic rhythm of freedom. It was like something unthrottled in my head, and the vehicle flew through space that wasn’t distance and didn’t matter anymore. The TransCanada a satin ribbon trance. It beckoned me on and on. (Lee 1990, 161)

However, what started as a short spontaneous journey, becomes a catalyst triggering Kae's transformation. As she witnesses Morgan's slow descent into alcoholism and depression, she realizes that her love for him is unrequited and that she cannot form her identity solely on the basis on her relationship with him:

I don't know how much of Morgan I found left in the stewed carcass I met, but at the end of my quest I found somebody else in my place. Somebody who was more enduring than I, more inquisitive, even when the truth stung. Somebody who could log the thoughts I didn't even know I had in me. Somebody powerful, who had stood alone on the edge of a great expansive wheat field, with the morning sun at her back, watching a new rising, a new life roll hill upon hill in from infinity. [...] I grew up suddenly [...] I had managed only one glimpse into what it was like to release one's being, to let it slip into the other realm where all the senses explode. And that was enough to set me off on a lifetime quest for more of the same. (Lee 1990, 162)

Just like in the case of her ancestors, the journey changes Kae and influences her decisions to unearth the family secrets and become a writer.

The desire to return to China is harbored by the representatives of the older generation of the Wong family and manifests itself mostly in Fong Mei. Disillusioned with her life in Canada, Fong Mei dreams of returning to a small Chinese village to live with her sister: "Fong Mei hated this country, which had done nothing except disqualify her[.] [She] hated this pious town, which kept her bored and laboring like a poor woman. She hated her marriage, and her mother-in-law especially. She longed to leave them and go back home" (Lee 1990, 164).

Yet, Fong Mei does not plan to return to China without her children; however, her decision to take Beatrice, Suzie and John back to her homeland is not motivated by the well-being of "her darlings" – she sees them merely as a "one-way ticket out of this backhog wash" (Lee 1990, 164), has their futures already planned for them in China, and does not care whether they want to leave Canada with her or not. Yet, Fong Mei's greed makes her postpone her return to China until her plans are thwarted by the changes in the global political situation:

in 1949, China closed—no, slammed—its doors to the west. Fong Mei never did accept this separation from her beloved sister. I like to imagine Fong Mei as this cold war cartoon character I once saw in a magazine, with no other option than to stand in front of those bamboo curtains, banging her fists on them, with what she didn't realize was an empty suitcase at her side. (Lee 1990, 167)

The impossibility of returning home only deepens Fong Mei's frustration with her life in Canada, making her even more cruel, heartless and cold and further jeopardizing her relationship with her children.

As a part of her mother's plan to "transplant [her children] back into China" (Lee 1990, 140), Beatrice is sent to a prestigious boarding school in Hong Kong. Although her education is cut short by World War II, Beatrice undergoes a spiritual change during her brief stay in Hong Kong:

One night, she dreamt that her hands and feet dissolved; the next night, her arms and legs as well. Then her trunk. Finally, everything, until she was nothing more substantial than a puff of smoke. [...] She felt comforted and happy that this world had especially opened up for her. [...] In this museumlike poignancy she could have stood forever. [...] [O]ne day she awoke and realized that this was the home she was destined to escape to. [...] Her house had to be an ethereal realm; she needed to build spiritual perfection around herself. (Lee 1990, 144)

Upon her return to Vancouver, Beatrice is a changed person: mature for her age, she learns how to live in a household with two strong-willed women locked in the never-ending conflict. Although Beatrice travels to Hong Kong numerous times throughout her life, none of these journeys proves to be as transformative and life-changing as the first one.

Kae is the only member of the Wong family who manages to truly return to China. Interestingly, she is only able to do that after discovering all the secrets plaguing her family. The newly-gained knowledge about her familial identity fuels Kae's decision to break with family traditions. As a result, she leaves her husband for her lesbian lover, Hermia, and embraces her desire to become a writer:

I have finally made up my mind not to take the job at the Howe Institute, not that I'm going to be a poor but pure writer, now that I've got a ravenous little mouth to feed, now that I've impetuously decided to blow the last of my own personal bankroll on a voyage to you at long last [...]. Anyway, sweetie, see you at the Kai Tak airport twenty-one hundred sharp, Hong Kong time, Tuesday, March fifth. (Lee 1990, 216)

Kae's travel to Hong Kong is the expression of freedom and independence – instead of being a transformative force in itself, it is the final result of her earlier transformation.

The motif of a physical journey is employed in *Disappearing Moon Café* to express the generational differences between the members of the Chinese diaspora and to discuss the influence it has on their identity. In the case of the older generation, the motif of the journey is used to illustrate the act of being forced to abandon one's homeland, the difficulty of accepting new circumstances, and the constant desire to return home. Hence, it can be stated that the physical journey has a transformative effect on Gwei Chang, Mui Lan, and Fong Mei as it uproots them and leaves them in a foreign environment without any proper support system. At the same time, as noted by Donald Goellnicht (2000, 314), they cannot return to the China they left as the country itself has already changed, something that Fong Mei learns the hard way in 1949. In turn, in the case of Beatrice and Kae – the representatives of the younger generation – the journey has a much more complex impact on them as it can be a trigger for transformation (something which Kae experiences during her journey to New York), a part of the transformative process (Beatrice's journey to Hong Kong) or the result of character's transformation (Kae's return to Hong Kong to start a new life). Here, the motif of the journey reflects the constant reshaping and reformulating of the migrant identity, its complexity and transnationality.

3.2. GENEALOGICAL JOURNEY

Neta Gordon describes *Disappearing Moon Café* as a novel “concerned with the complex task of negotiating the genealogical map’s already charted territory of familial interaction” (2006, 166). She further highlights that *Disappearing Moon Café* focuses on the ways in which the living members of the Wong family come to terms with the familial and cultural complications of their family tree (2006, 172). Through sending her characters on this genealogical journey, Lee not only draws the readers’ attention to the often-forgotten female family lines, but also provides the female characters with a space where they can reshape, redefine, and, finally, voice their identities.

Beatrice’s genealogical journey begins one evening in 1946 “when [she] came flying home with Keeman and news of her engagement [with] no way of knowing about the family’s twisted past” (Lee 1990, 155). However, when her mother hears about the engagement, she becomes enraged and, after throwing Keeman out of the house, she begins to beat Beatrice who, surprised by Fong Mei’s sudden and violent reaction, runs away from home to her best friend, Chi:

‘... I wish I were dead. Where have I got to go now? You know, I almost passed out on the train tracks on my way over here. I tripped over them because it was too dark to see. I should have just lain there until a train came. She said that ... she said that Keeman’s my father’s bastard son!’ (Lee 1990, 149).

After the first wave of shock has passed, Beatrice starts her genealogical journey, supported by Keeman and Chi. Yet, her search for answers is a particularly difficult one as even Keeman’s mother, Song Ang, is unable to tell them who Keeman’s father is: “Who knows for sure? It could have been [Choy Fuk], but I’m inclined to think your real father is the right one. You look like me, you see” (Lee 1990, 158). It is not until her teenage sister Suzie becomes pregnant with Morgan’s child that Beatrice finally unearths the biggest family secret: “‘Keeman? I just figured something out. You know, it’s not you and I who are brother and sister. It’s Suzie and Morgan’” (Lee 1990, 205).

Although Suzie herself lives in a complete ignorance of her sister’s struggle, she becomes the casualty of the carefully constructed web of lies uncovered by Beatrice. Her baby, born out of an incestuous relationship between a half-brother and half-sister unaware of their familial connections, dies due to the combination of congenital anomalies and postnatal complications, thus ending the patrilinear line of the Wong family. Abandoned by Morgan, shunned by her mother and in the throes of postpartum depression, Suzie commits suicide. Traumatized by her own psychological turmoil and the deaths of her sister and nephew, Beatrice decides to protect her daughter Kae through keeping her misinformed and preventing her from discovering the truth about the Wong family.

Against her mother’s wishes, Kae begins her genealogical journey at the age of seventeen when she catches the first glimpses of her family history through her association with Morgan. After her journey to New York, Kae turns to Chi, the only person she knows will answer her questions, and asks about her mother, father, Morgan, and, finally, Aunt Suzie. Yet, despite all the fondness and love Chi has for Kae, she refuses to reveal all the secrets. It is only after the birth of her son, that her mother finally deems Kae ready to learn the truth about her family:

Thus, the story—the well-kept secret that I had actually unearthed years ago—finally begins to end for me with the birth of my son, Robert Man Jook Lee, on April 29, 1986. It took quite the sentimental occasion for my mother to finally loosen a little of her past that she thought so shameful—the same past that has shaped so much of my life, with evil tentacles that could have even wormed into the innocent, tender parts of my baby. (Lee 1990, 23)

Although by this point Kae has discovered all the skeletons hidden in the closet of the Wong family by herself, she is only now finally able to understand the significance of what she has learnt.

For Kae, her genealogical journey becomes a liberating experience. In contrast to her mother and aunt, she frees herself from the negative influence of what she perceives to be a family curse brought by the insistence on legitimacy and blood purity. Moreover, she finally gains the strength and willpower to fulfil her own dreams of becoming a writer and moving in with her lesbian lover: “Look at my horizon, Chi. Not a cloud in sight. The sky’s the limit. I am free. Isn’t that how the prophecy goes? After three generations of struggle, the daughters are free” (Lee 1990, 209).

The motif of a genealogical journey is employed in *Disappearing Moon Café* to address what Donald Goellnich describes as “the pathological obsession with ‘authentic’ bloodlines” (2000, 316) which can be observed in the Canadian-Chinese community. The said obsession – shared by Mui Lan and Fong Mei – aims at ensuring that the offspring of the Chinese immigrants would remain pure blooded and refrain from assimilating with the host society. However, as proven by the story of Suzie and Morgan, “achieving familial and cultural ‘purity’ proves destructive” (Goellnich 2000, 316). Both Beatrice and Kae discover this destructiveness through their genealogical journeys and, while Beatrice is too close to the truth and too traumatized by it, Kae is able to place the actions and decisions of her great-grandmother and grandmother in the broader spectrum of the historical and political circumstances, stating that she sees “them as a lineage of women with passion and fierceness in their veins [who] in each of their woman-hating worlds [...] did what [they] could” (Lee 1990, 145). Through accepting and showing the understanding of her ancestors’ decisions, Kae is able to free herself from the family curse by finally rebelling against the societal expectations and gender roles in the name of four generations of women.

3.3. PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNEY

The final type of a journey in *Disappearing Moon Café* is a psychological journey of self-discovery. At this point it needs to be noted that this type of a journey often occurs during a physical or genealogical one as exemplified by the characters Beatrice and Kae.

As mentioned in the earlier section of this article, during her stay in Hong Kong Beatrice is haunted by a dream in which she enters the spiritual world. This psychological journey to the “ethereal realm” (Lee 1990, 144) helps Beatrice to discover inner peace and find her own way in an environment filled with strong-willed women:

Beatrice came from a home where two incredibly strong-willed women had fought over her since the day she was conceived. While the two battling titans trampled the household to pieces, Beatrice got used to doing things quietly, her own way. As soon as she became illuminated in Hong Kong, she turned towards the clear blue horizon and never looked back. With her usual elegance, she let her mind simply float away. She forgot there was anything else, like a stroke victim whose left side of the brain forgets that the right side ever existed. Oh, but the goddesses were good to her! They gave her lots of wind to fly by. Privilege would always be Beatrice's divine right because she had no concept of mediocrity, neither her own nor the rest of the world's. (Lee 1990, 144-145)

However, this transformative character of the journey is only possible when Beatrice starts to psychologically disconnect – or disassociate – from her physical body. Beatrice escapes into her mind, ignoring as much as she can the constant rivalry between her mother and her grandmother; instead, she is focusing on the perfection of her inner and spiritual world.

Yet, Kae, Beatrice's daughter, notes that her mother's escape to her own imaginary world is simply a coping mechanism she devised as a child: as Beatrice always tried to avoid facing the harsh reality of living with her mother and grandmother under one roof, she invented "the faraway place [to which] she had fully escaped" (Lee 1990, 145). While Beatrice manages to escape the poisonous influence of her mother and grandmother, she still needs other people to serve as an emotional crutch: "she would always need someone else to fret over the petty details of our human condition. [...] She was given first Chi, then my dad, and finally me, to do the mundane, oftentimes trying tasks like picking up the pieces" (Lee 1990, 145). Yet, Kae justifies her mother's helplessness – as the oldest daughter of the rich and privileged family, Beatrice has not been given an opportunity to live for herself as she always had duties to fulfil and could not follow her dreams and urges: "Mother never understood poverty, not even when she married a poor man [...] – she could not grasp the reality of underwear greying with use and time" (Lee 1990, 145). Hence, Kae perceives her mother's ability to escape into her spiritual haven as symptomatic of her privileged upbringing: on the one hand, she has the luxury to abandon the harsh reality for the beauty and perfection of her imagined world; on the other hand, though, her isolation from the outside world made her confused and helpless which further motivated her to retreat back into her inner safe place. Moreover, this tendency to seek solace in herself renders Beatrice practically helpless when she is forced to face the truth about her family.

What Beatrice started – this inner journey for the sense of one's identity – is continued by Kae whose epiphany comes at the tender age of seventeen during her trip to New York. Upon meeting Morgan in one of the New York pubs, Kae gets a glimpse of what she may become if she will put her mind to it and remain strong in the pursuit of her goals. After the first wave of shock – "an identity crisis" as Kae calls it – has finally passed, she begins her quest to learn more about her family. As she slowly unveils the family secrets, Kae also learns more about herself, who she really is and what she really wants to do with her life.

The culminating moment in her psychological journey of self-discovery can be found in the segment of the novel entitled *Feeding the Dead*. After giving voice to the ghosts of

her female ancestors, Kae has an imaginary conversation with Hermia during which she forms her own idea of identity:

Kae asks Hermia: “Is that what they call a forward kind of identity?”

Hermia 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)

Hermia’s answer proves that, in her mind, Kae begins to understand that her identity and her sense of self are influenced and affected by the experiences of her foremothers and that only through finally telling their true stories, she will be able to define herself:

“Oh my gosh, Chi,” I exclaim, “I just thought of something.”

“What?”

“That means that I am the resolution to this story.”

“What do you mean?” [...]

“It means that I have to give this story some sense of purpose.”

“So, you knew that all along, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t. I just realized now. [...] Don’t you see?” I gesticulate emphatically.

“I’m the fourth generation. My actual life, and what I do in it, is the real resolution to this story. The onus is entirely on me. Yipes, what do I do now?”

“Aren’t you taking this a little too seriously?” [...]

“[W]hen was the last time *you* were called upon to give meaning to three generations of life-and-death struggles?” (Lee 1990, 209)

Yet, to tell her part of the family history, she needs to reinvent herself and do what none of the Wong women managed before – follow her dreams. Finally freeing herself from the shackles of gender and familial roles imposed on her by her family, Kae declines a job offer from a prestigious accounting firm and moves to Hong Kong to become a writer and reconnect with her lover.

Kae’s choice of *routes* over *roots* reflects the plurality and complexity of her identity and suggests that, just like in the case of other young members of the Chinese diaspora, her sense of self is constantly changing. Hence, her psychological journey is not merely a quest for identity, but a process of shaping and reshaping it.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Disappearing Moon Café is the fictional family memoir exploring the experiences of migrants and the influence those experiences had on both the whole families and their individual members. The main purpose of the novel is to help the main protagonist, Kae, construct her true sense of self and reshape her identity through unearthing the family secrets. Yet, in order to achieve that, Kae needs to retrace different journeys of her foremothers.

The motif of a journey manifests itself in *Disappearing Moon Café* in three main forms: a physical journey, a genealogical journey, and a psychological journey. While the main means of travelling presented in the novel is the genealogical journey, it remains strongly entwined with the psychological journey which, at the same time, can be motivated by the physical journeys made by the characters.

By following the physical journeys of Mui Lan and Fong Mei from China to Canada and studying their experiences of living in Canada, Kae realizes the important role the collective plays in the life of a migrant individual: without the support of their “societies of women” in a land they perceive as increasingly hostile towards their community, both women are forced to become as cold and hard as men. They harbor hatred for Canada and, in the case of Fong Mei, dream of returning back home, a desire characteristic for the first wave of immigrants. This transformative power of a physical journey is experienced – albeit in a much more positive way – by the younger generations of the Chinese-Canadians as for both Beatrice and Kae the physical movement from one place to another becomes a catalyst for positive changes in their lives.

The genealogical journey, started by Beatrice and finished by Kae, gives the protagonist better insight into what motivated her great-grandmother and grandmother: the pathological obsession to maintain blood purity and the need to isolate themselves from the host culture. As her mother is too traumatized and too involved in the family politics to even try to fight them, through studying her genealogy Kae is able to free herself – and, by proxy, all future generations of the Wong women – from the roots that were keeping her fixed in only one possible dimension of her identity.

As has been mentioned, the psychological journey is closely intertwined with the genealogical one as learning the truth about her family becomes for Kae the moment of significant psychological change and triggers the search for her sense of self. It is only after discovering all family secrets that she is able to choose *routes* over *roots* and follow her dreams, finally understanding the complexity of her migrant identity. Kae represents the intersection of the three types of journey presented in the novel and, through that, becomes the conclusion of her family story and the one responsible for telling it. Yet, in order to do so, she has to free herself and accept the plurality of her nature – she fulfils Fong Mei's desire to return to China, but she sees it as a new beginning and not as the return to the no-longer-existing imaginary homeland.

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