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## **Dystopian Worlds in the Writings of Canadian Women of Asian Descent**

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper analyzes the realistic worlds recreated by Canadian writers of Asian descent and proves that, although Canada is a multicultural country representing itself as a utopia, discrimination and racism survive as a contemporary scourge. Moreover, the paper will relate in more detail to the historical situations depicted in the novel.

### **KEYWORDS**

Canadian Literature; Chinese Canadian; Japanese Canadian; Vietnamese Canadian; Ethnic Discrimination; Racism; Femininity; Maoist Utopia.

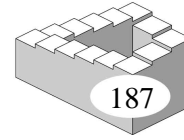
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Since the first days of the European colonization of North America, its territory was seen by many as the land where dreams come true, making hundreds of thousands of people come and try to find a better life there. As in the past, mass media still makes us believe today that Canada and the United States of America are utopian worlds where you can live a perfect life and, to a certain extent, they are right.

North America was not everybody's Promised Land, because back then only the white immigrants had the right to lay the foundations of a new life and get rich, while the African and Asian immigrants were treated as slaves. Meanwhile, things changed and African and Asian immigrants obtained equal rights, but this cannot compensate for the suffering and humiliation those past generations had endured.

Starting with the middle of the nineteenth century numerous Chinese immigrants arrived in British Columbia in a desperate attempt to get rich overnight during the gold rush and "by 1860, Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia had an estimated population of 7000. [...] But when the gold began to run out, they moved on to other occupations in domestic service and agriculture, and then as railway builders"<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, not only did they not get rich, but also had to face discrimination



and unjust laws in order to survive. Moreover, starting from 1885 a series of exclusionary acts were promulgated by the authorities in order to reduce the number of Chinese immigrants who came to Canada. They were forced to pay a “head tax” of \$50 in order to enter Canada, which increased in time to \$500<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, in 1923 the *Chinese Immigration Act* prevented Chinese immigrants to enter Canada<sup>3</sup>.

After the repeal of the exclusionary act in 1947 the families of Chinese residents were permitted to come to Canada<sup>4</sup>. Afterwards, the rate of Chinese immigrants to Canada started declining, because the People’s Republic of China enforced strict emigration laws isolating itself from the rest of the world, and only a few came from Taiwan and Hong-Kong. This lasted until the 1980s, when the Chinese communist system became more relaxed and new waves of Chinese immigrants started arriving in Canada, bringing annually “an average of 35,400 immigrants”<sup>5</sup>.

Today the Chinese diaspora is one of the biggest minority groups in Canada, comprising more than one million Canadians of Chinese descent. Unfortunately, although the current Canadian legislation offers equal rights for all its citizens, Chinese and other minorities still need to fight modern racism and economical marginalization.

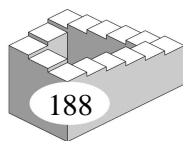
Jan Wong (1952- ), a Chinese Canadian woman writer, goes beyond Canadian racism in her novel *Beijing Confidential*. She describes the Chinese immigrant not only as a discriminated Canadian citizen, but also as an unwanted Chinese citizen in the People’s Republic of China. She also depicts China’s transformation from an old empire with vast cultural heritage into a dystopian world.

Right from the start Wong, who embodies the authors memories in the novel, emphasizes that the Chinese are discriminated in Western countries by underlining

that one of her grandparents came to Canada in 1881 and did not have to suffer the effects of the exclusionary acts, while the “other three grandparents had arrived at the turn of the last century, and had paid the discriminatory head tax on Chinese immigrants”<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, even today authorities do not see her as a fellow Canadian, although she is a third generation Chinese Canadian<sup>7</sup>. All of these facts point out that the Canadian utopian image, which is intensely popularized, is nothing more than an illusion. In addition, Canada is in reality a dystopian world where discrimination, social differences and ethnic stratification are major issues.

Wong goes on to criticize not only Canadian utopian images, but also Beijing’s old and new prefabricated and false utopian images which hide the true dystopian images. First of all, she critiques the Maoist regime for taking to extremes the utopian dream of national purification from the bourgeois elements by killing thousands of innocent Chinese and sending millions to camps of re-education through work during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1967). Furthermore, she sees how the communist regime transformed China into a dystopian society, in which a father would denounce his bourgeois son to the authorities and a son would do the same to his bourgeois father.

Secondly, she explains how Beijing is today nothing more than a simulacrum city, since medieval buildings are torn down and replaced by skyscrapers, while in touristic areas authorities build replicas of traditional houses. Moreover, the new buildings, as in the case of the hotel in which Wong’s family stayed during their trip to China, provide the maximum comfort by offering air conditioning. On the opposite, if you stop the air conditioning or open the windows you suffocate<sup>8</sup>, because on one hand the rooms



have no other type of ventilation and on the other hand Beijing is so polluted that the air is hardly breathable.

Thirdly, to Wong Beijing is a city of dystopian contrasts, because the rich Chinese live in big houses and drive expensive cars like Mercedes-Benz or Ferrari, while the poor who come to Beijing from small villages need to get a temporary permit for staying there and afterwards end up working and living on big construction sites, where they get only “20 Yuan (\$2.6) a day”<sup>9</sup>.

Beijing is also the dystopian world of the cell phone users. Here, although everybody has a mobile phone, they need to change their cell phone and cell phone numbers every three or six months<sup>10</sup>, because they do not want their phone numbers to be published in telephone books. This makes them feel watched by the state and, if they let the telephone company publish their phone number in a telephone book, they would get assaulted eventually by telemarketing operators<sup>11</sup>. Unfortunately, this makes tracking an old friend impossible and losing your cell phone means losing all your friends’ phone numbers and all the possibilities to get in touch with them.

Wong lived for a long time as a stranger in both countries. In Canada she would not be recognized as a Canadian, because she had an Asian face; in China she could not live as a Chinese as she was coming from a democratic country and other Chinese people took her for a spy. Although she was considered a stranger, she managed to become a successful career woman, truly a new woman who does anything in order to achieve her goals.

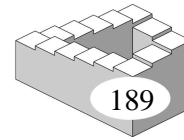
Similar to other modern women, Wong chooses to embrace a reporter career and be on the front lines of danger. Consequently, she is nearly kidnapped after the Tiananmen Square massacre and later on contracts a dangerous disease. Furthermore, she does

not ignore her maternal attributions and finds the time to take care of her children’s education. All of these prove that women can both do dangerous jobs and take care of the household, deserving equal rights as men. On the contrary, other women prefer to obey their husbands in order to live peaceful lives in big houses and drive luxurious cars. Scarlet, Wong’s old friend, decides to be an obedient woman who can live a good life instead of being equal to men and possibly suffering from poverty<sup>12</sup>.

Kerri Sakamoto’s novel *The Electric Field* deals with the discrimination problems faced by immigrants in Canada, which is also the subject of Wang Jan’s autobiographical novel, but unlike Jan, the former chose to focus on the Japanese immigrants who were forced to live in internment camps, and how they chose to deal with these experiences. In effect, Sakamoto describes the drama of the twenty thousand Japanese Canadians who lived in Canada before the beginning of the Second World War. These people “lived along the coast of British Columbia [and] engaged in fishing, farming, lumbering, manufacturing, trade, service<sup>13</sup>, but were forced to abandon their jobs and houses after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and were relocated to internment camps in eastern Canada. This happened because the Japanese Canadians were seen by the Mackenzie King government as posing a risk to national security<sup>14</sup>.

*The Electric Field* describes not only the experience of living in internment camps, but also the Japanese Canadian’s loss of identity. They feel like having no identity because they are not accepted by white Canadians as true citizens of Canada, although many of them are second and third generation immigrants, and because they cannot identify with the Japanese cultural identity completely.

Asako Saito, a middle-aged spinster who takes care of her ill father and her



irresponsible brother, used to live a quiet and reclusive life until Yano's family moved next door. After moving there, Mr. Yano started to hold cultural and political meetings. Once Miss Saito accepted to attend his meetings and discuss with Yano and his wife Chisako about their life in North America and their living problem. Afterwards, she started having an identity crisis.

At first, Asako Saito questioned her identity as a Japanese ethnic, *nihonjin*, because she thought she neither looked nor acted like real Japanese. She even envied Yano's wife for her ability to act as a *nihonjin*. But unlike Saito, who is a second-generation Japanese emigrant to Canada, Chisako is native Japanese and Saito should not have reasons to envy her ability to make ikebana arrangements or speak fluent Japanese, since she studied these things during her school years in Japan. Saito does not only bear a grudge against Chisako for her Japanese language and cultural knowledge, but she also looks at her with resentment since she is fluent in English.

Saito envies Chisako for the slightest of reasons, even for her colorful dresses that make her look like a "true Japanese lady from a samurai family"<sup>15</sup>, unlike Saito who usually wears "quiet browns and navies"<sup>16</sup> clothes that make her look like a widow.

Saito is frustrated. Even though she studies Japanese "at a school from Port Dover"<sup>17</sup> she cannot always remember how to speak correctly and how to use specific expressions. This lack of memory can be noticed again when she meets Chisako for the first time and says hesitantly "Hajime mashite. Dozo yoroshiku"<sup>18</sup>, which means "How do you do? Pleased to meet you".

The novel focuses on how the second-generation Japanese emigrants to Canada deals with the acculturation and deculturation processes. On one hand Mr. Yano, a nisei, who hates all Asian people married a

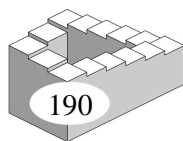
native Japanese, speaks Japanese fluently and tries to understand and bring together the Japanese Canadian community. He manages to adapt to his new life in Canada and live as a proud Japanese Canadian emigrant, after spending his youth in an internment camp. On the other hand Saito, who has tried to show her appreciation for Japanese culture and Japanese Canadian emigrants, wants nothing but to live a peaceful and secluded life.

Chisako, like Saito, feels that she does not belong to the Japanese ethnic world and tries to find an escape route from this world, but unlike Saito who secluded herself voluntarily, Chisako tries to run away by meeting with her *hakujin* lover, Mr. Spears. Unfortunately, Mr. Yano suspects her of adultery and after confirming it he decides to kill her, their kids, Mr. Spears, and finally commits suicide.

Another important character is Saichi, a cute girl who visits Miss Saito often and is in love with Mr. Yano's son, Tam. Although Saichi comes often to see Saito, she regards her as a burden, because she behaves unfeminine. She usually sweats a lot, cannot stay in one place and visits Miss Saito without washing her face and without combing her hair<sup>19</sup> and this makes Saito judge the little girl for not respecting a gender scenario.

"Asako tries to put the [traumatic] past away"<sup>20</sup> and hides Yano's flyers from her father who could get disturbed by those flyers, because they would make him remember the hard days he spent in the Canadian camps. She also hides the existence of Yano's meetings from her brother and does not let him see the photos taken during the time he spent in the internment camp, thinking that by hiding them she could protect him from learning how he lived as a baby in the internment camp.

Although Saito tries to forget about the moments she spent in the Canadian



internment camp, she remembers fragments of that period every day, because during that time she would have stay behind her older brother Eiji, who helped her live through those hard times.

Another reason why she cannot forget about her traumatic period is because she lives in the vicinity of Mackenzie Hill, which is associated by her and especially by Yano with “the prime minister. That bugger Mackenzie King”<sup>21</sup>.

Kerri Sakamoto’s novel shatters again the Canadian utopian image of a multicultural country which embraces unity in diversity and sketches the picture of an ugly society full of discrimination where the individual identity is put under a question mark.

In her autobiographical novel, *Ru*, Kim Thúy presents her journey to a new utopian home after the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and describes how a Vietnamese immigrant integrates in the Canadian society. Unlike Kerri Sakamoto’s and Wang Jan’s model of Asian emigrant who came to Canada in hope of finding a better life, Kim Thúy explains the hardships she endured together with hundreds of Vietnamese in order to escape communist Vietnam. Furthermore, her novel does not offer only a critical perspective on the Canadian utopian image, but also an optimistic view, which gives us the true image of a multicultural Canada with its strong and weak points.

In this landscape of utopian Canada, Asian immigrants had access only to degrading jobs until the middle of the twentieth century, many of them accepting such jobs thinking that by doing so they could offer their children a better future. This is also the case of Kim’s parents who have come to Canada to work almost like slaves, hoping their children could get a better education in this country and would also be protected from communist ideological pressure.

Sadly, Kim finds out that Canada is not perfect and many people judge her family for not being Caucasian<sup>22</sup>. However, she has also found nice Canadians who help her and her parents adapt to the new environment: a salesman who offers her father a free red sweater, while somebody else gives them used mattresses, school colleagues who invite her daily to their home in order to help her adapt to the new lifestyle. In spite of the many hardships her family members face, uncle Seven and aunt Six have accomplished their American dream and now, they proudly own a stone house and a garden with roses and big old trees<sup>23</sup>.

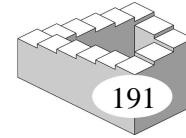
In the end, we may say that Jan Wong, Kerri Sakamoto and Thúy Kim manage to depict the real image of the multicultural Canada by depicting both its strong and weak points. Moreover, they have broken the myth of the utopian Canada and have shown that this country is a dystopian world in which white people hardly accept Asian immigrants as equals, because they look and think different. Here the Asian immigrant or the Canadian of Asian descent does not know if he is a Canadian or an Asian.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tina Chui, Kelly Tran and John Flanders, “Chinese Canadians: Enriching the cultural mosaic”, *Statistics Canada*, no. 11, 2005, p. 24, [http://thornlea.sharpschool.com/User-Files/Servers/Server\\_119514/File/Library%20Classes%20Documents/Gr.%209%20Geography/chinesecanadians.pdf](http://thornlea.sharpschool.com/User-Files/Servers/Server_119514/File/Library%20Classes%20Documents/Gr.%209%20Geography/chinesecanadians.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Wong, *Beijing Confidential: A Tale of Comrades Lost and Found*, New York, Random House LLC, 2010, p. 5, <http://books>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Wong, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165-172.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts-Moore Judith, “Establishing Recognition of Past Injustice: Uses of Archival Recors in Documenting the Experience of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War”, *Archivaria*, no. 53, 2002, p. 66, <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12837/14056>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> Kerri Sakamoto, *The Electric Field*, Vintage Canada, Toronto, 1998, p. 22, [http://books.google.ro/books?id=Qhi1gljT1TAC&printsec=frontcover&dq=kerri+sakamoto&hl=en&sa=X&ei=BR16UqOJJYKF4ASS-YHADg&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=kerri%20sakamoto&f=false](http://books.google.ro/books?id=Qhi1gljT1TAC&printsec=frontcover&dq=kerri+sakamoto&hl=en&sa=X&ei=BR16UqOJJYKF4ASS-YHADg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=kerri%20sakamoto&f=false).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p.92.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p.7.

<sup>20</sup> Gay Beauregard, “Unsettled, Unsettling”, *Canadian Literature*, 2011, [http://canlit.ca/-reviews/unsettled\\_unsettling](http://canlit.ca/-reviews/unsettled_unsettling).

<sup>21</sup> Kerri Sakamoto, *Op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> Thúy Kim, *Ru*, trans. Sheila Fischman, Random House Canada, Toronto, 2012, *passim*, <http://books.google.ro/books?id=2E0Gbyg0uCGC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Th%C3%BAy+Kim&hl=en&sa=X&ei=XY96UsWcDYn74QTelYHACg&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.