Women at Crossroads: 
A Study of Women’s Search for Identity in 
Twentieth Century Chinese-American Fiction

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Abstract

Many Chinese-American women writers see themselves as “hyphenated Americans” who must deal with cross-cultural issues and experienced frustrations of inter-ethnical and inter-racial discriminations or stereotypes. Chinese-American women writers often raise questions about the relationship between ethnicity, difference, gender, and identity in their narratives. They write about the frustration of biculturalism, such as cultural dislocation, the problems and challenges of integrating two cultures, intergenerational struggles within immigrant families, the conflict between acculturation and adherence to an ancestral tradition, and between assimilation and parochialism. They investigate the experiences of early Chinese immigrants and the second-generation of Chinese Americans as the cultural outsiders in search of their selves while facing cultural and political crossings, and their questions of personal and national loyalties. Furthermore, they reveal the uncertainty and moral dilemma, which characterized often by a sense of loss and confusion, Chinese-American women have gone through in their quest for selfhood and autonomy over the past century.

In the six selected texts, namely, Sui Sin Far’s “Mrs. Spring Fragrance,” Jade Snow Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter, Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club, Patricia Chao’s Monkey King and Mei Ng’s Eating Chinese Food Naked: A Novel, it is interesting to note that Chinese-American women in the twentieth century did not attempt to speak to, or give voice to a collective Chinese-American identity. Rather, they emphasized their struggle to create a distinctive space for themselves, and articulate notions of femaleness, body and sexuality. These Chinese-American women writers of different generations have contributed to the construction of a new literary tradition known as Chinese-American women literature. The act of writing signals these Chinese-American women writers’ act of self-assertion, self-revelation and self-preservation. Women’s writing in these cases becomes a form of resistance to imposed sexuality. As seen in these women’s writings, women’s self narratives reveal their persistent search for identity, which is a search for freedom from racial and male supremacy as well as gendered roles.
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