

*Was there ever a point in anyone's life span, a point free in time, devoid of memory, a point when choice was any more than sum of all the choices gone before?"* (p. 31, 'Run River', Joan Didion)

Sky Lee's novel 'Disappearing Moon Cafe' traces the genealogy of the Wong family from 1834 to 1986. It is written from the female narrative perspective of Kae, who unravels a chain of events set in motion by her great grandfather Gwei Chang in 1892. This chain of events influenced the person she has become in 1986, at age 36. Moving back and forth in time, the novel provides snapshots of the circumstances and events that define the characters and their stories. These snapshots, or episodes, determine genealogical links and interconnections across generations. Each character's response to their circumstances has consequences that impact the Wong family as a generation spanning entity. Thus, the novel explores people's lives in terms of cause and effect, exploring the universal question of whether or not human beings have free will. The snapshot or episode narrative form also reveals how the perceptions of choice and contexts within which choices are made change over time. These changes contribute to the decisions the characters do or do not make, adding depth to the novel and a scope that is epochal.

The paradox of freedom and bondage in relation to personal choice is a central theme of the novel. The traditional Chinese perspective on freedom is that life is a matter of fate and karma. A certain action can result in "ten thousand years of years of wandering for [your]unintended soul"(29) and a Chinese proverb says "Your future can be read like newly driven snow/be carefully how you read/cause every step will show"(38). The Wong family shares a fundamental belief that "Eventually we must learn to accept our fates"(45-46) and "Life is always tragic in the end"(184). This paper will examine the evolution of the central theme via the panorama of characters and stories in the novel, and sub-themes will be identified which support links and interconnections in the manner of threads. Delineating the circumstances and choices of various characters in the book, it will show that choice is influenced and/or determined first by the context of culture, second by the context of family, and finally by the context of gender. These contexts effect the character's beliefs and attitudes about their situation and circumstances. However, the paper will argue that the novel presents personal choice of beliefs and attitudes as the ultimate choice, because it exists independently of circumstance and constraint, and may be the only choice available to an individual in a situation where external choices are curtailed or eliminated.

'Disappearing Moon Cafe' is a dramatic novel which includes stories of tragedy, victimization, incest, and suicide----as well as moments of joy and triumph. The paper will first look at the Wong family within the contexts of culture and family, and proceed to focus on the context of gender. The novel is written from a female perspective, and the central theme is explored most extensively within this context. Chinese culture is very patriarchal, and patrilineage is the construct which determines the choices the women make. This contributes to the dramatic episodes of the novel and creates a legacy of family secrets and "dead ghosts"(37). The women in the novel embrace the limitations and possibilities of all the contexts, and collectively they answer the author's question 'Does choice exist?'. Kae poses this question to herself as she thinking about her mother's past, "the same past that has shaped so much of my own life"(23).