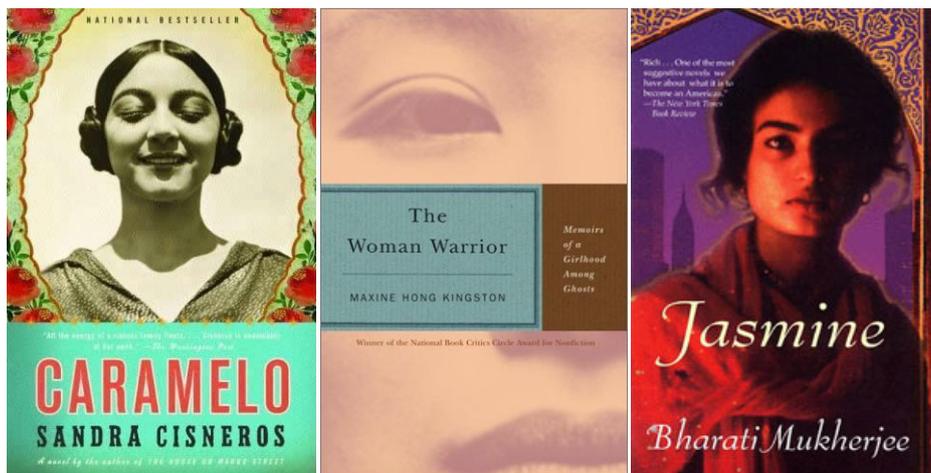


Who Am I in America?



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Who Am I in America?

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the migration of people from different countries and cultures to the US, the question has always been: What is an American? And throughout history, the answer has always been changing and is still in progress. In different texts and art forms the topic has been used to reflect on ethnicity in the USA, among which literature. It has been one of the means to reflect upon ethnicity in general, but also to reflect upon one's own ethnic identity (Gilman 19-26).

Even within fiction, different approaches have been used to question the age-old American question: What is an American and who am I within this changing and multicultural society? Until the second half of the twentieth century, being an American meant being white and of European descent. However, with the rise of multi-culturalism and social pressure groups, the various ethnic groups living in the margins changed the existing centre versus margins idea and they placed their own marginality in the centre. This meant that non-whites from all over the world who came to the US or who were born there, but were not considered as being American, questioned the Euro-centrism of America's Anglo-Saxons. In addition, women writers from marginal groups with a dominant patriarchal structure had to deal with a double marginality within an often multiple struggle against marginality because of both race and gender. In contemporary fiction this very same process can be followed and the female writers Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston and Bharati Mukherjee fit in this larger picture.

Starting with the many questions Sander Gilman asks in his article *Ethnicity-Ethnicities- Literature-Literatures* it is important to ask what it is that makes literature interesting in the broader discussion on ethnicity. Does it explain the inner soul of the marginal man or woman, the other, non-visible side of America? And is ethnicity created and

by whom, society or the individual? These regularly asked and discussed issues have long been an issue and are still debatable. Although Herbert Gans speaks of ‘the third generation’ when he discusses his notion of symbolic ethnicity (432-441), also people from the second generation try to find their ancestral roots and find what they are made of because, different than their migrated parents, their ethnicity is not just instrumental or functional but they have learnt other ways of behaviour than their parents have given them through tradition; their ethnicity is sensitive and a matter of choice (Gjerde 2). Also Werner Sollors portrays in his introductory essay *The Invention of Ethnicity* that ethnicity is more a sense of ethnicity rather than a fixed issue defined by history, politics or race and therefore, rhetoric, texts and literature additionally are important aspects to naturalise the processes (xx). Edward Bruner, in addition, sees ethnicity as being created by narrative structures because they “organise and give meaning to experience” (134) although “there are always feelings and lived experiences [that are] not always fully encompassed by the dominant story.” (134) For Bruner, even though they give meaning, narratives are often incomplete and are constantly subject of change (142). One way to create a sense of ethnicity and to pass on culture, whether this has been done consciously or not, from parent to child is through telling stories that contain a family’s or group’s history and the values they think are important in life and often different than the country they live in. In fiction, it is more than once the case that these stories are an instrument for writers to pass on their own version of their multi-ethnic heritage. Their ancestors’ histories are combined with what they have learnt in their country of living and their fiction shows a mixture of both countries; in fact, their fiction explores and portrays a double or an in-between world. For many multi-ethnic writers it is the struggle that involves defining an identity that is important; a hybrid identity means living in multiple realities that require a variety of survival techniques, and to rely on a dynamic concept of identity, because old habits are being discarded and new ones are not yet formed (Ikas XIII; Park 166).

Alongside the struggles of the second or third generations who were born in America stands the struggle of the immigrants who are continually coming to and becoming part of America and according to scholars, the immigrant experience is a general experience of uprootedness and alienation or transplantation (Gjerde 2-22). Hence, their search for similar groups in the alienated foreign country is called by Homi Bhaba as a “gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; ...;gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues....; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present.” (292)

Ethnic senses are created by fiction and narrative structures, by storytelling myths and rituals. Narrative structures organise and give meaning to experience and additionally, ethnographies and ethnic fictions are guided by an implicit narrative structure (Bruner 131-4). It is therefore particularly noticeable that many post-colonial writers break the existing boundaries of realism, including the reality of the mythical or supernatural and a meaningful genre to break these boundaries of realism is a first person narrative. A first person narrative situation (or narrating-I) tells a story about events happening to an earlier ‘self’. Typical first person narrators are restricted to a personal, subjective, and limited point of view. They have no direct access to events they did not witness in person, and they have no way of knowing for certain what went on in the minds of other characters. Consequently, readers often value this perspective as a yet-to-be-validated-testimony of uncertain reliability (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 339).

Within the multicultural discussion, women play a separate role. Etter-Lewis informs her readers in the introduction to her book that women of colour are part of a very diverse group with very different voices and cannot be seen as just a part of the enormous group of the female gender, but should be regarded as the multifaceted lives of women of colour. She quotes African American writer Toni Morrison who states that the US is a race-conscious culture while at the same time it claims to be race and gender free, universal, and as a result,

women of colour are denied by both their race and gender (Etter-Lewis 1-9). Hull etc. emphasise this problem in the title of their book: *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men but some of us are Brave*” (Etter-Lewis 3), because there is no separate and at the same time distinguishing term to describe both race and gender of women of colour. Herein lies the same denial mentioned by Morrison and Etter-Lewis.

To get a comprehensible insight in fiction of women of colour, it is wise to analyse the narratives of women of colour with different cultural backgrounds and to compare and contrast them through three novels, namely *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros, *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood among Ghost* by Maxine Hong Kingston and *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee. The writers of these three novels portray, from different points of view, the importance of the sense of ethnicity and hybridity in the multi-ethnic surroundings of the USA. Cisneros was born in the US by Mexican and Mexican-American parents, Hong Kingston was also born in America, but she descends from Chinese parents. Slightly different is Mukherjee’s background, who was born in India, but migrated via Canada to the USA. In their novels they depict various similar characteristics to express their identity with a clear emphasis on aspects that draw them to the culture of their ancestors, while at the same time they emphasise their current environment that has also shaped their ethnic sense. All three women come from strong paternalistic societies which have an impact on their view on both America and their inherited culture. Noticeable is that all three writers use the form of first person narrative to centralise the marginal woman, but also to maintain and call attention to the subjective point of view of fiction because they have a Post-modern perspective on both the US and narratives in general. In other words: they decentralise both the Eurocentric and patriarchal paths, and try to search for a new path that goes well with their hybrid ethnicity. After an overview of their lives and surroundings, in the analysis of their fiction the following issues will be discussed per writer: they firstly represent female loyalty conflicts of their

protagonists' experience regarding their family and their American hybrid way of life. Secondly, to emphasise a personal subjective approach, they use a first person narrative as a specific strategy and besides, fragmented stories from their inherited culture and the impact on their American lives are intertwined in their fiction and demonstrate the discrepancies between their inherited culture and the US, family life and being a woman in both cultures. Eventually they emphasise distinctive aspects: Cisneros uses the hybrid language of the Chicanas, Hong Kingston mixes Chinese mythology with Western observation and Mukherjee's protagonist attempts to escape from Indian and old world destiny. Finally, these books thematise the journey to self knowledge.

So, even though Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee bring about comparable circumstances in their literary search for a creation of an American identity as a result of their racial and female marginality, in their fragmentarily displayed first person narratives they make use of different literary strategies in a journey to self because of their diverse cultural backgrounds and consequently represent the larger discussion on the multicultural diversities of the American identity.

2. Overview of the writers, their background and literature.

Although all three writers write fiction, their different backgrounds play an important role in the creation of their fiction. So it is important to know who they actually are and what aspects of their lives have influenced their fictional stories.

The first woman writer is Sandra Cisneros who was born in the Puerto Rican district of Chicago in 1954. Her parents' mixed ethnic background of a Spanish speaking Mexican father and an English speaking Mexican American mother is reflected in the cultural and linguistic hybridity of her work. She is the only daughter in a family of seven children, something that affected her as feeling marginalised as a consequence of her gender. Her father's homesickness caused the family to frequently travel between their home in Chicago and her grandparents' house in Mexico City. She has always lived in urban neighbourhoods and her literary voice, a mixture of Spanish and English, has been described as the voice of the 'barrio' (Madsen 106). Not only in her fictitious work is the barrio an important factor, also in her personal life it still has got a great impact on her. An ongoing commitment to those growing up in the barrio has led her, among others, to become a teacher in projects for the urban underprivileged.

Cisneros' literary work is also highly inspired by her Mexican American background and her youth as a girl in the barrio. Her novel *The House on Mango Street* draws heavily upon her childhood memories and a childlike style of expression to depict a girl's life in the Chicano community. Her second novel *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* continues with the exploration of ethnic identity within the patriarchal context of the Chicano community. *Caramelo*, her last novel describes the travels to the home of her father's youth in Mexico. As she mentioned in the introduction, she had to invent her grandmother's story to fill in the gaps and the social context her father had never told, a stylistic choice Maxine Hong Kingston likewise had to make for her novel *China Men and Other Stories*. In this novel she

describes a large part of Mexican history, the history that is not only very important for Cisneros' family but also for other Chicano families.

Because of the geographical and historical link between Mexico and the USA many Mexicans working in the US, unlike other immigrant groups, travel back and forth between Mexico and America and by this their state of in-between is determined. On top of this, in the mid 1900s Mexican land became American land and many Mexicans living on the American side of the new borders became "foreigners in their own land" (qt. in Takaki 178). For many Mexicans this meant political vulnerability and powerlessness. Even though Mexicans were included as labourers, mostly in mining, on the railroads and in agriculture, they felt socially excluded by large segregation (326) and as a consequence, only in the barrio, their communities, they felt safe and at home (334). As a result of their closed communities, constant travel and close distance to the Mexican borders, many Mexican Americans speak Spanish while living in America. Their language as a mix of English and Spanish is a specific feature of the Chicano/a culture and also Cisneros expresses this linguistic hybridity of the barrio in her work. Being a woman in a Mexican American community has had a great influence on Cisneros' ethnic and gender identity: "[t]o adopt models of femininity that are thought of as Anglo is, as Cisneros describes, to be "told you are a traitor to your culture. And it's a horrible life to live. We're always straddling two countries, and we're always living in that kind of schizophrenia that I call, being a Mexican woman living in an American society, but not belonging to either culture. In some sense we're not Mexican and in some sense we're not American." (qt. in Madsen 108)

Another woman being a second generation American is Maxine Hong Kingston. Hong Kingston was born in 1940 as the daughter of Chinese American immigrants. Her father came to the US years before her mother followed. Hong Kingston did not speak English before she went to school and while attending school she started telling stories. Here she was a very

good student, but she felt she was not always understood and went to the University of Berkeley, California. Being a Chinese American, she has never visited China but lived in the outer rims of San Francisco's China town in her youth. Even though she has never been to China, she has always been looked at as being Chinese and also her work is often received as work of a Chinese woman, by both white Americans and Chinese Americans. She explains her dissatisfaction with this reception of her work in her essay *Cultural Mis-readings by American reviewers* in which she makes clear why her work is American and should not be received as work of a Chinese or Chinese American woman. Most of her work is inspired by the stories of her mother and the silence of her father, but also the history of Chinese in America had a great impact on her work. To write an own Chinese American history, she wrote the collection of stories *China Men and Other Stories* in which she focuses on the immigrant experience of her father. Just like Sandra Cisneros had to invent stories about her grandmother's past that her father had never told her, because of her father's silence Hong Kingston had to let her imagination speak about Chinese male immigrants who had a great impact on American history, but have always been forgotten, and as a source for *China Men* she used the general history of Chinese immigrants in America. Their history can be followed along the lines of several exclusion acts. So demanded the Naturalisation Law in 1790 that Asians couldn't become Americans. In 1888 the Scott Act made Chinese immigration illegal. The Gentleman's Agreement in 1908 required the same for Japanese and the National Origins Act in 1924 for all Asians. In 1965 however the Immigration Act allowed Asian immigration again (Takaki 191-221). Because of this long history of exclusion acts, one was not allowed to hire Chinese through which Chinese were consequently forced into self-employment, which was mostly in the laundry and became known as the Chinese laundry men. Most Chinese who arrived in America were men who left behind their wives in China because they never intended to permanently stay. For this reason the Chinese men were seen as sojourners

instead of immigrants. They mostly worked as cheap labour force on the plantings and on the railroad to link the east coast to the west coast which was one of the great turning points in American History. Hong Kingston's book *The Woman Warrior* alternatively tells the female line of Chinese American families and is highly inspired by Hong Kingston's youth and her general ideas about being a woman in a Chinese American family.

Unlike Cisneros and Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee was not born in the USA, but in Calcutta and came to the US in 1961 for study reasons and with the intention to return to India. In India she received a very British education and was told that the British way of thinking was the right one (Schoch 1). She was a member of a traditional Hindu family, which meant that "men provided and women were provided for" (Mukherjee, *American Dreamer* 32), with the result that she had to marry the man who her father had chosen for her. However, during her studies abroad, at the University of Iowa, she met her future Canadian husband and instantly married him. Her marriage placed her into a transient with conflicting loyalties to two very different cultures, the Canadian and Indian one. Together with her husband she moved to Canada and experienced a very lonely time in what she calls "the no man's land" (33) and her first novel, that dealt with this experience, *The Tiger's Daughter* became an "expression of the expatriate consciousness" (34) about her transient experiences in Canada. Dissatisfied with the Canadian policy on their multicultural society, Mukherjee migrated to the US and became a naturalised US citizen. She claims her right to be American because she "had to prove the U.S. government that [she] merited citizenship" (32). She claims that she is "a voluntary immigrant [who] became a citizen by choice, not by simple accident of birth" (34). She therefore dislikes the term Asian-American that has been regularly used to place Mukherjee in a group separated from other Americans. Just like Maxine Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee rejects hyphenations because "[w]hy is it that hyphenation is imposed only on non white Americans?" (36) By rejecting it, she visibly

refuses a cultural centre and its hyphenated peripheries with all consequences following. Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories* tells the multiple immigrant stories which she believes make the American Culture, a culture that is not fixed but is in a constant state of transformation. In all her work Mukherjee is highly inspired by the sacrifices that immigrants have to make to become one with their new culture. In this line her book *Jasmine* is one example of the sometimes violent process of becoming an American. Mukherjee believes in the self-creation of identity as she is able to do in the new world of America and therefore, her identity is not a fixed issue as used to be in the old world.ⁱ

Although these three woman writers come from various different background and have various different strategies to work up to a sense of being American, they also share similarities in their sense of being an American woman and how they process this in their works. One of the similarities is that they are all women coming from a paternalistic society which often is in conflict with ideas about womanhood in America.

3. Womanhood and Loyalty.

All three writers more than once experience a loyalty conflict as they live their life as an American woman, because they all want to keep aspects of their ancestral culture and at the same time want to behave in an American way. Especially concerning aspects on female issues both cultures can come into conflict and have their effect on the choice they have to make between loyalty towards family values, which are mostly patriarchal, or American values. It is therefore not a coincidence that the 3 protagonists in their books are female since Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee write from their own female perspective. Mostly on issues regarding womanhood, the narrators choose American values, which is not always accepted by their family and relatives. The three women reject the patriarchal values they have learnt from their parents and want to choose their own way of life.

In one of the stories in Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, 'At the Western Palace', the reader witnesses a fight between Brave Orchid, living in America and her Chinese sister, flying over from China, about the rights a woman should have in marriage. In this scene, Brave Orchid, who came to America in her younger years, has got an American vision on the mistress her brother-in-law has. Unlike her Chinese sister, who obediently accepts the mistress, Brave Orchid does not and persuades her sister to reject her husband's behaviour. Besides this single issue, they also fight over how Brave Orchid's children, one of them is Maxine, are to be raised as good Chinese or Chinese Americans, and their American habits are frowned upon, because they have "no feelings", "no memory" and are "impolite" and therefore "untraditional" to Chinese standards (111). Additionally, in the story 'White Tigers' Maxine navigates between American and Chinese American life, when she for example says: "My American life has been such a disappointment" (47), after which she adds up a list of unwanted scenarios for women in China, because she has learnt that "[t]here is a

Chinese word for the female *I* – which is ‘slave’” (49). Maxine feels captured in her Chinese womanhood because “[e]ven now China wraps double binds around my feet” (49).

Jasmine, on the other hand, navigates between American and Indian life. She tries to steer towards America, but in some cases it is hard to reach and sometimes even impossible. She refuses, for example, to believe and live according to the prophecy she has been given by an astrologer in Hasnapur, her birthplace:

“Lifetime ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears- his satellite dish to the stars- and foretold my widowhood and exile.[...] No!, I shouted, You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!” (1)

Throughout the novel the astrologer seems to have proven his right, even though Jasmine has been struggling all her life to prove the opposite. Other incidents show that her struggle is not only a cultural clash, but also a modernity clash; the standards of how a woman should behave are so different in both cultures that once Jasmine chooses to live a modern life, she has to struggle the most. Indian women are taught to be obedient and humble, but from the beginning of the novel it is evident that Jasmine chooses not to, but chooses her own modern life instead: “To want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world” (61) even when this means that she has to fight physically and mentally to get what she wants. That this has an effect on how her Indian environment looks at her is an unwanted but given circumstance. Subsequent to some untraditional choices her modern husband and she made in their young life, her female friend refuses to accept her choice because “it seems to me that once you let one tradition go, all the other traditions crumble” (68) and Jasmine ignores the warning: “I’d already had my warning, which I succeeded in blocking.” (69) Throughout the book the reader becomes more familiar with her struggle because she explains that she is “caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness.” (213-4) She does not only choose between promise and dutifulness, but also

between “the feminine decorum that society expects” (Fayonville 54) and knowledge. Instead of beauty, her tool is knowledge, to be seen in her hunger for literature, her interest in Masterji, her teacher, and her husband’s technical manuals. Her first husband Prakash, however, has been very important in her fight towards becoming a modern woman. When Jasmine, at the age of 14 wants to get pregnant he tells her that she is “confusing social and religious duty”, traditional Indian life, “with instincts”, when, at that time, she was only a “village fifteen, ready to be led” and he encourages her to use her knowledge and voice to argue (71). During her life, though, she becomes more and more a modern woman, first of all with the help of her husband Prakash, but later in life she individually thrives to become the woman she has chosen to be herself, instead of one established by the wishes of her family, and in America she has the best opportunities to fulfil her own wishes. While being in India she felt the women surrounding her held her back in her progress towards a modern woman, whereas in America in contrast, she immediately notices that American women help her to become this modern woman. Quite the opposite to her Indian female friends and family, she chooses an alternative to the general expected sati -suicide- after her husband’s death and moves to America. Although she still commits a figurative suicide by burning all her old items and choosing a new name, she continues as a new woman, Jyoti is dead, Jasmine is born. Similar to the American pioneer woman, Jasmine adopted the gold rush mentality in which she ultimately wishes to become a new born woman from scratch, without any loyalties towards India, the old world. However, it is still difficult for her to assimilate because older Americans still see her as a newcomer (Fayonville 53). Throughout the book it looks as though Jasmine does not show any loyalty towards traditional India and all the more to America, which is indeed meant to be like.

Cisneros’ previous novels, *Woman Hollering Creek* or *My Life on Mango Street* for example, contain more explicit female issues than *Caramelo*, but nevertheless, *Caramelo* does

not merely describe Mexican or family history: Cisneros has well chosen to describe Mexican and family history according to the story of her grandmother's, so through the matrilineal line and thus from a woman's point of view. Besides, in between lines there are several remarks about the role women play in Mexican society. There is for example "I don't want to share my toothbrush with anybody!" By which we can infer women were toothbrushes."(164) or, "Soledad could not have known Narciso was not singling her out among all women, but simply enjoying her as his birthright. Was she not "*la muchacha*" after all, and was it not part of her job to serve the young man of the house?"(156) Her parents are not immediately happy having a girl, at least they do not express their joy towards Celaya and she reacts: "Since when do you care? I say to mother. – All you ever worry about is your boys." (364) However, she definitely notices she was unwanted, at least her gender, something that affected Celaya directly "[t]hen I was born. I was a disappointment. Father expected another boy." (231) Besides, even grandmother is not happy having a female grandchild:

“all my sons are my sons[...] I love them all the same [...] She uses the Spanish word *hijos*, which means sons and children all at once. –And your daughter? I ask. What about her? The Awful Grandmother gives me that look, as if I'm a pebble in her shoe.” (29)

This last quote expresses that even in their chosen words, just like Maxine Hong Kingston shows in her novel, her family express their disregard towards women and prefer boys over girls. They simply do not exist in their language and can therefore not even be raised:

“Viva's right, sometimes you've got to help destiny along. Even if it call for drastic measures. Father says the army will do Toto good, make a man out of him and all that shit. But what's available to make a woman a woman?” (361)

Upbringing means making choices for the boys, not the girls. “If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfil.” (34)

Just like in Hong Kingston's and Mukherjee's novels, the ideas on womanhood are predominantly passed on from mother to daughter and kept as tradition by the women. The Awful Grandmother in *Caramelo* suffers from the life she is trapped in, in which her husband, full of other women, forgets her and ignores her when she is pregnant, and marks her family with her temper created by her miserable life. Although the women come from a patriarchal society, in the family and the lives of their daughters they play a large role in holding back their daughters and granddaughters: "The Grandmother decides everything, same as always." (Cisneros 251)

Traditions that need obedience of women clash once the three narrators want to have more freedom, or choose an American lifestyle, because they are told by their female relatives that they are not Mexican, Chinese or Indian anymore, rejecting tradition. However, Mukherjee states it in a slightly different manner and declares that it is more a matter of traditional versus modern, than Indian versus American and the difference between American style individualism and female liberation versus old world responsibility and female oppression (Fayonville 53). Still, also her narration expresses the fight against pressure given by female relatives: "Maternal stories meant to position a daughter within the cultural hierarchy have been deployed by Jyoti to fashion an identity that challenges the position and destiny circumscribed for her." (Schlosser 78) Although her words are focussed on Mukherjee's own book, they reflect the struggle of all three narrators of Mukherjee, Hong Kingston and Cisneros writings.

The protagonists feel a certain loyalty towards their ancestors, but have difficulties living according to the rules given to them through tradition, because they are, chosen or not, more American than not. They struggle in a conflict between self interest and the interest of others, mainly their family (Schlosser 85). The three novels thus show that loyalty conflicts often appear in female values like obedience, dutifulness and hierarchy within their family.

These traditional values are passed on through the matrilineal line, mostly by the mother. Since every woman experiences her loyalty struggles in a different way, a literary form has been used to express the subjectivity of each narrator.

4. How I See the World

In literature the form of I-narrative or first person narrative is often used to tell a story about events that happened to an earlier 'self'. In post-colonial literature it is a style used because it expresses a personal, subjective and limited point of view. It therefore gives realism another identity and places a new meaning upon the idea of the 'truth'. Cisneros, Mukherjee and Hong Kingston's novels fit this picture of I-narrative. Their choice to use a first person narrative has a large impact on their readers' reception of the stories they tell in their novels because this specific literary form expresses a subjective point of view on the society the I-person lives in. Everything the protagonists have experienced is personal and therefore show a specific, limited viewpoint on the society around them. Nevertheless, this personal experience can be observed as a general experience of all those women who are in between two or more cultural backgrounds, a large group among American women. In other words: it can be received as a general statement for all personal stories of women with different cultural backgrounds, American women, because the only way the I-person can judge the world around her is by her own personal subjective view that is shaped by the American, Mexican, Chinese or Indian culture seen through her own eyes, just like all the other American women can only judge the world seen through their own eyes.

Though, their stories are read too often as the voice or a representation of a single united cultural group. Hong Kingston even finds it dangerous to state that her stories are general stories, representing a marginalised group. In her essay *Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers* she clearly opposes the reviewer of one of her books, who claims that her stories are atypical for the Chinese who live in America. She responds by saying that she is indeed not Chinese, but Chinese American. Moreover, she lives her own personal life, creates her own characters based on her own history, whether this be Chinese or American is irrelevant for her, and how she sees the Chinese American girl in her books is her own

business (55-65). Actually, she here states that she is not stereotypical at all, just like many other Chinese American women who have their own lives, history and viewpoints. In her respond Hong Kingston is noticeably in conflict with most of her reviewers who only read her narrative as exclusively from a Chinese American woman who does not fit into the stereotypical idea of being Chinese or Chinese American. According to Hong Kingston these stories are her personal interpretation of reality as a Chinese American woman, which can be different from her readers' interpretation of reality. She questions the doubts her reviewers have to whom she writes her novels. She says: "Why must I represent anyone besides myself?" (63) This is exactly exemplifying the statement and the general aspect of the personal stories expressed in a first person narrative form. The personal worlds of her protagonists, though, precisely make these first person narratives recognisable. "Readers can see the variety of ways for Chinese Americans to be" (63). In this light, her exposition can therefore also be read for Mexican Americans, Indian Americans and any other Americans, so in fact, they all experience their lives in a personal way and no one can represent another. Which in fact is a statement that all personal stories are both personal and general at the same time: it "is a two-way process; it affects both the individual and the national-cultural identity."(Mukherjee in: 'Beyond Multiculturalism' 34) The reader only gets to know the point of view of the protagonist, the I-person, while at the same time virtually everyone has got his or her own personal view on the world he or she lives in.

All three first person narratives, then, give a paradoxical message. On the one hand, although all three books have been written with personal experiences as a starting point and are based on autobiographical elements as Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee have articulatedⁱⁱ, they are on the other hand not merely autobiographical and have to be read as pure fiction. The difficulty is that, specifically the I-narrative makes the reader receive the novels as an autobiographical writing, a personal tale of what has happened to the lives of

these multi-cultural American women. These personal experiences the I-persons undergo make the written epistles of Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee vivid, lively and understandable and hence will make the reader being able to understand the difficulties someone copes with, precisely because of the form of I-narrative. The paradox lies in the fictional claim combined with autobiographical aspects. By using an I-narrative and partially autobiographical and historical elements, combined with fiction or fantasy, they question and play with consisting notions of the truth in such a way that the question of reality or truth is not important anymore. The story itself and the truth within have become important. Through its personal claim, it is flexible in its subjectivity and because it does not pretend to be factual, it leaves room for alternative viewpoints.

Caramelo for example is a novel based on the stories of Cisneros' father: "It is essentially the tale of a Mexican who is not unlike the millions of other immigrants to this country whose stories go untold." (Navarro para. 3) It is a description of one of the constant travels up and down between Mexico and the US. The family live in America, but they have strong roots in Mexico. Readers sense these strong roots by first of all the setting of the novel, mainly in Mexico, and secondly through the stories grandmother tells her grandchildren. In Mexico the narrator Celaya is fully surrounded by Mexicans and there she notices the differences between her life in America and life in Mexico, especially regarding the freedom that women in both countries have. The physical change from one place to the other, from America to Mexico, expresses in this book the mental change and difficulties she goes through during her Mexican American life. She looks at Mexico with an American point-of-view and experiences America with the point-of-view of someone who knows aught of her own Mexican history. As a young girl Celaya undergoes her life in Mexico, but does not always understand her grandmother's words or decisions. This is mainly evident in cases when she is regarded as a young girl as opposed to young men. Her grandmother's life,

however, has been told in third person narrative, but always from Celaya's perspective. In this way readers have an insight in Mexican history, but only through Celaya's eyes, a young Mexican American girl. This story can be compared to a similar novel by Hong Kingston, *China Men*, in which Hong Kingston tells the story of her father which is equal to the stories of all the Chinese men who migrated to the US and who have as she expresses it herself: "No stories. No past." (in Feng 10) Here Cisneros and Hong Kingston notify that each immigrant has his or her personal story; it only needs to be told to be known and as a part of a larger history, it can only be known and told as a personal one. Whereas Cisneros and Hong Kingston tell the immigrant story based on their parents' stories, Mukherjee tells the tale of Jasmine based on her own immigrant experience. She too states that she only tells the personal tale of Jyoti becoming Jane, an Indian girl "discovering American selfhood" (Carter-Sanborn 573) and at the same time she claims to take part in a larger history. Like Celaya in *Caramelo*: "[t]here is place for them to identify with. You know, you make it so specific that it does that little paradox of becoming universal." (Cisneros in Birnbaum 10) And here it all comes together, all three writers write a personal story that through its specific features, moving away from stereotypes through their first person narrative, becomes generally regarded as a universal story.

Because the narrators only see a part of their cultures, they neither fully understand their ancestral culture nor fully understand American way of life. The only way they have access to their ancestral culture is through storytelling and the only way they have access to American culture is through their own single subjective point of view. For example, for the Chinese Americans in Maxine's surroundings, all non-Chinese Americans were considered to be 'ghosts', because they were not there for real, meaning non-Chinese is unknown and therefore non-existing. Maxine hears this story and creates her own ideas about both Chinese Americans and non-Chinese Americans. She is however, well aware of her subjective

viewpoint because “[h]is version of her story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs.” (‘A song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’ 147) Hong Kingston’s strategy to show her subjectivity through a narrating-I is found in these twisted stories. She forms her narrative through well-known Chinese mythological stories, Fa Mu Lan for example, and reforms them with aspects of her non-Chinese life in such a way that they are not just recognisable as Chinese mythology, but also as the mythology of her own Californian life. Hong Kingston’s stories are also full of tales that go from mother to child. The reality that the narrator creates in these stories is her personal idea of the truth, even though it is based on generic tales, myths and dreams. Not knowing what to do with the tales her mother Brave Orchid tells her, she interprets them with all her knowledge of American culture and in this way she mixes both cultures. For the protagonist these mixed stories are her truth, not for Brave Orchid, her mother or any other person. The reader, who only knows the version of the I-narrator, only gets access to Chinese culture through these seeming imperfect stories. Hong Kingston’s use of imperfect myths is a very clear example of how the boundaries of realism, which also exist in mythology, can be broken. This has been used as one of the techniques by other post-colonial writers (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 450), and can therefore be seen as a well-known technique to break with standard ideas about realism in fiction.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* is not based on parental stories, but on an immigrant experience she herself went through. The readers get to know the story of an immigrant who has to struggle and has to learn to know her new country, unlike Cisneros and Hong Kingston who were already born in America. So the immigrant stories and the mythology from an ancestral country are not only told to her by her ancestors, but they are experienced by herself. Jasmine is one of the many immigrants whose stories go untold. In telling her tale, she exposes her readers to the tale of an immigrant. What happened to Jasmine in her evolution from Jyoti to Jane? In her novel, Mukherjee links the experiences of

her narrating-I with well-known characters from English coming-of-age novels *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* showing that her evolution from naive young Jyoti to grown up woman Jane is personal yet recognisable. However, due to her own development, she “was forced to abandon” (35) them. Again, by telling a personal tale, she gives insight in the life of one immigrant, it is only one story, but paradoxically enough the tale of one woman becomes universal. She is the gold rush woman of her time struggling in becoming American, just like many other gold rush women who had to give up “the easy homogeneity of their native countries for a new version of Utopia” (‘American Dreamer’ 35).

Instead of stories told by her mother, or a general history, Jasmine's life itself is part of her own history. Not told stories, but memory is her equipment: “[m]emory becomes her tool [etc.]. Thus maternal stories meant to position a daughter within the cultural hierarchy have been deployed by Jyoti to fashion an identity that challenges the position and destiny circumscribed for her by astrologer, family and culture alike.” (Schlosser 78) Jasmine’s experience is therefore not only based on factual information, but also on memory in the same manner Celaya’s and Maxine’s stories go told based on memories and pasts. Jasmine explains her own subjectivity as follows: “I wonder if Bud even sees the America I do” (97), visualising her awareness of her subjective point of view.

To sum up, the novels of Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee have been written in the form of a first person narrative with a reason. A first person narrative is received as a highly subjective form, while at the same time all events are experienced as real by the protagonists. In this way the writers have on the one hand broken with the boundaries of realism but on the other hand created a new idea of realism, the realism seen through the eyes of their protagonists. They have, in this light, rejected the classical ideas on the cultural centre versus periphery standards and have embraced a multiple idea of truth by placing the margins, women of Mexican, Chinese or Indian descent, in the centre of their literary universe. On top

this they have mixed factual information with subjective interpretation and even imagination with the result that their stories become both general, universal and personal at the same time, just like every person is surrounded by his or her history, but interprets it in a subjective manner. Writing these stories means that they have an “an instrument for giving us access to our histories” and in fact an “act of self-writing” (Lionnett in Schlosser 76). Stories or history as seen in the theory of Bruner for example, help form a collective subconsciousness. What remains of a collective subconsciousness when every writer claims to be personal and subjective? Is it therefore the claim of subjectivity that expresses the lack of a collective history and therefore a lack of fixed sense of identity. Thus, following Ikas’ theory, readers have to rely on a dynamic concept of identity while reading Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee who help define American literature and its historical discourse as a multivoiced narrative.

For them, not only the intimate voice of a first person point of view is a useful strategy, but also another Post-modern literary form, namely the fragmentary use of stories, history, mythology and contemporary life is of significant importance.

5. A Life Full of Fragments in Stories Full of Fragments

And I don't know how it is with anyone else, but for me these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country I am homesick for, that doesn't exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there.

(Celaya in *Caramelo*, 434)

In addition to a first person narrative, the stories Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee have created are not only told from a subjective point of view, but are also fragmented and told with a fragmented knowledge of stories, mythology, history and contemporary life. The lives that are described are neither a single story from beginning to the end, nor are they a unity that only stems from one culture; the women who are the protagonists in the novels, are a unit made of separate fragments of both of their worlds. Whereas ethnic senses are created by narrative structures (Bruner 131-134), in a fragmented world the protagonists may experience a sense of uprootedness or alienation in the way John Gjerde meant it in his essay on choice in ethnicity (2-22). Following this line, the protagonists sometimes have a need for narrative structure and in their need for structure, they therefore fill in the fragments themselves to create a new narrative structure made of old and new world information because it organises and gives meaning to life's experiences (Bruner 134). These new narrative structures bring them into conflict with both their old and new world, because their personally structured world does not coincide with the rest of the world around them.

Fragments can be found in the description of both a fragmented life and a fragmented story. Since the I-characters only tell what they see or even experience what they experience from their subjective point of view, that what is described in the novels is not more than a fragment of the reality around them. Readers not only receive a fragmented description, but a

fragmented description of a fragmented life. For example, the Mexican history that is told in *Caramelo* is the history told through the eyes of a young girl, given to her by her grandmother. The reader only learns about those aspects of that history a grandmother tells her grandchild. So instead of reading an objective description of Mexican history, the reader reads a doubly narrowed and interpreted version. Also, the stories in Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* contain Chinese history told by the protagonist's mother Brave Orchid which are interpreted in an American way by the narrator Maxine. Because Brave Orchid only tells stories that have been told and changed throughout history, the protagonist and therefore also the reader, receives only a fragment and a changed part of local history. In her story 'No Name Woman' for example, the protagonist hears a story about Maxine's aunt who committed suicide. This story however, contains enormous gaps of, for her, relevant information and the only way she can deal with the given information is to fill in these gaps herself by using her own imagination that has been formed with her life in America. In this way given history is fragmentarily delivered and changed for the readers by the imagination of the I-person. Hong Kingston explains this feeling in the story 'White Tigers' like this: "I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep." (25) Along with the first person, Fa Mu Lan, the heroine of the story Brave Orchid tells, becomes Maxine, who, within the fragments she heard has created a new structure for herself and the readers.

Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* on the other hand, rejects history by changing her name every time she moves further into the modern world, physically and mentally, and consequently becomes a new person. As follows she lives a fragmented life without a past or clear future, her life does not consist of her own or any other history, but of separate parts that follow up each other. "To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine [...]. Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities." (70) A new name means no past,

no steady and given identity, but a chosen one, again and a again. Each new name creates and represents a new part and therefore a new identity in Jane's life.

The ultimate goal for Jasmine first of all, is to become American. Throughout the novel, she more and more rejects her Indian ancestry and more and more embraces American culture which she truly believes fits her better, seeing that her "grandmother may have named [her] Jyoti, Light, but in surviving [she] was already Jane, a fighter and adapter." (35) By rejecting her family's choice to select a name and choose one herself, she and her husband "had created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. Vijn&Wife. A vision had formed" (88). Jasmine had created structure and thus identity herself, like Gans and Bruner have described in their essays on the active creation of a sense of identity through either words or symbols (Gans 425-6, Bruner 142-4). Ultimately, at the end of the story, as Jane, she has come close to her chosen, wanted identity as an American woman, but still she is "out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (214), because she still does not have what she wants: a singular history as an American woman. Celaya and Maxine in addition, both feel like an American woman, but their environment sometimes denies and contradicts their sense of being American. All three protagonists thus, have a sense of their ancestral culture that is not complete but is merely a fragment and above all, their sense of being American is also fragmented. As a result, they neither fit in their ancestral culture, nor in the American culture and here their fragmented world from both sides lets them feel as if they are alienated from both worlds.

Consequently, the fiction Mukherjee, Cisneros and Hong Kingston write is an expression of their de- and reconstructed reality because everything the protagonists hear or have fantasised about has created them, even though it is only a fragment of reality or it is no reality at all. Their sense of reality is as to speak deconstructed and multiple. They do not see

one single reality, but multiple realities that have been formed by the multiple signals and stories by the multiple societies they live in. The protagonists in the novels have to steer a middle course between the different signals they receive about life and society and as a consequence, each writer creates her deconstructed sense of self in other stories. Hong Kingston's stories in *The Woman Warrior* are created out of the sources of dream, memory and myth. All mixed as though a true story, the story that has made and influenced the protagonist. However, these dreams, memories and myths are fragmentary as well as subjective. Also Cisneros' stories told in *Caramelo* are based on both memory and myth. The novel is not a coherent story with a single plot, but Cisneros kept sidetracking to other plots and stories, because, as she said in an interview, "I knew too much about everybody, I kept branching off into other substories" (qtd. in Navarro 1), because "a life contains (of) a multitude of stories and not a single strand explains precisely the who of who one is." (Benson 1) In the disclaimer of her book, she explicitly says that she has invented what she does not know and exaggerated what she does "to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies" because the truth is unimportant and only the story is remembered (para. 2). In an interview she explains her disclaimer as an explication that the book is not autobiographical, but only based on real people (Birnbaum para. 8). Besides, for the same reason Hong Kingston's narrator has to use her imagination, Celaya tells she has to use "lies, healthy lies[,] so as to fill in the gaps" (188) and so creates her own narrative in search for a narrative structure, because it does not exist in her fragmented life. The narrator in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* creates her whole life around fragments; her life is a continuum of fragments and with each fragment she rejects previous fragments by taking another name, a symbol of taking another identity. In this way, Jasmine becomes a myth herself. Every time she enters a new phase in her life, her old life is no more than a memory or a myth of herself. Unlike the other narratives, the narrator in *Jasmine* is not merely a product of told fragments,

but every time she reinvents herself, she is a fragment of her own life, with all the other fragments from her previous life influencing her like the stories of parents or grandparents that have influenced the protagonists in *Caramelo* and *The Woman Warrior*. She in fact becomes the myth of the American frontier and Fayonville draws a line with the story 'Shane' Jasmine read as a young girl in her small Indian village (Fayonville 53).

As seen above, all three writers combine incomplete plots, subplots and deconstructed mythology and history and therefore it is hard to tell what the centre is and what the periphery in their novels. They hereby thus reject the centre-periphery standards of realistic literature. When these stories are compared to the lives of multi-cultural American women, they are, in their fragmentation and subjectivity, alike their lives and are an example for those many American women who live in the margins of American culture and their ancestral culture. Their lives and stories can be described in the words Hong Kingston used in 'No Name Woman': "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (13) In other words, it is very difficult to distinguish the influence of traditional culture from the influence of all the other aspects one comes across in life. Both Cisneros and Hong Kingston suffer from this vague thin line between tradition and other aspects as Hong Kingston explains in 'No Name Woman': "Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America." (13). Mukherjee on the other hand can be compared to the brute survival those in the emigrant generation had to experience in Hong Kingstons previous words.

Finally, the three novels are fragmented themselves because firstly in *Caramelo*, the plot of the trip to Mexico-City is merely a thin line to tell the many short stories and histories of Mexican History and the family's history. Secondly, Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is a selection of stories in which other stories are told and sometimes intertwined with Maxine's sense of reality. The stories are fragments of the life of a young woman. *Jasmine* is a linear story but it is told in single fragments of the life of Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane all mixed through each other. In using fragments of Mexican, Chinese, Indian or personal history, or fragments of mythology, tales and contemporary life, the three writers have tried to represent the fragmented and alienated life of a woman living in between two cultures, whether as second or first generation woman. "The narrative structure of juxtaposed settings and hybrid recollections mirrors the complexity of the narrator's identity." (Schlosser 75) Added with the fragmented novels themselves, they have once more rejected the classical ideas on the centre and the periphery in both American society and literature. The stories can hereby be an example for the many stories of American women who are placed in the margins. although placed in the margins, these women do have an own identity they wish to express through literature. In their literary pieces they therefore use a specific strategy that typifies their ancestral roots.

6. Literary strategies

Each of the three writers uses an important aspect from her ancestral culture in her literary work. The emphasis on this important aspect symbolises that they, although being American, still have a particular background that has influenced their view on the world around them. This emphasised aspect is often mixed with an American point of view and criticised in order to create a new intercultural heritage. In Mukherjee's novel this is a fixed future, set in destiny, that has to be fought, in Hong Kingston's stories mythology passed on by her mother is mixed with American observation, and in *Caramelo*, Cisneros' book, the hybrid language, often heard in the barrio she grew up in, is the main aspect to emphasise the hybrid culture of Mexican Americans.

6.1 Escape from destiny

What makes Mukherjee's novel different from Cisneros' and Hong Kingston's novels, is that Mukherjee herself has been an immigrant and writes from a first generation experience instead of a second generation woman who knows information about her ancestral country from second hand, stories. Her strong wish to escape from India's strong traditions and her desire to choose herself to become an American is the most important issue dealt with in her novel *Jasmine*.

In *Jasmine* the protagonist escapes from her destiny given by an astrologer. Her whole life is a struggle against fate that still hunts her and captures her in the same way as Mukherjee has experienced during her migration process and thus can *Jasmine* be seen as a representation of Mukherjee's own struggle against old world-India's fixed standards in which "[i]dentity was viscerally connected with ancestral soil and family origins" (Mukherjee, "Beyond Multiculturalism" 30). According to Mukherjee herself "the concept itself – of a person not knowing who he or she is – was unimaginable in our hierarchical,

classification-obsessed society.” (American Dreamer 32). In the tradition known to Mukherjee, “intercaste, interlanguage [and] interethnic marriages” (32) were forbidden. Emigration was out of order, because it diluted tradition. *Jasmine*’s protagonist faces the same fixed background: “it seems to me that once you let one tradition go, all the other traditions crumble.” (68) says one of Jyoti’s Indian friends in reaction to her choice to not have fate, astrology and social values interfere with her marriage. Mukherjee’s identity was created by her ancestral line and in order to become an American in Mukherjee’s eyes meant and means struggling to assimilate, to throw away the old ancestral fixed standards and forcefully embrace a new American identity (Beyond Multiculturalism 30-1), an identity which is in constant progress. Being an American equals becoming one and Jasmine characterised this precisely. She faces the problems Mukherjee describes about her own emigration process which relates to others’ emigration process and besides, reflect Mukherjee’s ideas on how an American migrant’s psychological process works and should work. Jasmine’s first forceful step to America is when her husband was murdered. Then, in distress and refusing to follow the Indian female tradition to commit sati, she comes to America. During this first trip away from destiny, she was literally raped, her rape symbolising the extreme crisis one can have whilst coming to a new country and new culture. She abandons India and her first violent act is to kill her rapist, refusing to be a humble, submissive, in other words true Indian, woman. After this struggle she takes on a new identity by using another name. Indian Jyoti/ Jasmine is no longer part of her but a mere myth from the past that needs to be shaken of. Every step she takes means a new identity and therefore a new person, symbolised by a new name. Jasmine is not always understood by the people around her, neither American nor Indian. Americans see her as the always exotic Indian young woman and her Indian family frowns upon her choices to become a modern woman, later represented by the Indian host family in the US she shortly lives with. The last page of the book describes her present, final state of being,

precisely how the astrologer the young Jyoti “under a Banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur” (1) has foretold, as a widower and in exile: “Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud. I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope.” (214)

Jasmine, like Mukherjee herself, shakes off the forceful norms and values of the old world Indian destiny and chooses to become the American woman she desired to be by investing in the present shaking off the past. However, in the end it seems terribly difficult to have shaken off pre-given destiny, old standards which keep coming back to her new American life. Although her constant re-invention shapes Jasmine, survival also depends on the recognition of historical forces and immigration processes that might not have been finished.

6.2 Mythology

Whereas Mukherjee’s protagonist rejects the past, Kingston’s book relies heavily on imagination and memory formed by Chinese mythology. Her book of stories is her American version of the myths and talk-stories of her mother. These talk-stories have been passed on from mother to daughter for centuries so also Maxine, as protagonist in ‘The Woman Warrior’, receives traditional information through talk-stories full of unexplained metaphors. Metaphors are a common style in Chinese traditional culture: “[w]e approach the truth with metaphors.” (Feng 2) Hong Kingston does the same by writing her book of stories in approximately the same style as her mother did: she passes on mythology. Important is that the stories the women tell, contain a mixture of knowledge about a family’s past and an imagined past. So Hong Kingston’s stories are not factual, but a mix between fact and fiction. Maxine follows her mother’s example with the stories she hears from her mother but with the

difference that she creates her own imaginary world around the stories. She for example wanders of while her mother talk-stories: "I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroine in my sleep" (25). In her dreams Fa Mu lan becomes Maxine, Maxine becomes Fa Mu Lan, Fa Mu Lan is I (Woman Warrior 26). For her audience her heroine becomes 'I' and therefore Maxine is becoming the myth herself and whether the stories are real or fiction is of no importance. It is nevertheless, important that the stories are transformed by the protagonist, since she hears the stories with her broken knowledge of China, mixed with American knowledge and ideas about womanhood. They are thus, in fact the stories of an American woman. For Maxine's Chinese family, no story means no history, like Brave Orchid's sister mentions that "[h]er American children had no feelings and no memory" (107) because her American children did not have enough knowledge of Chinese family history and values. At least they did not show it. The talk-stories learn the daughters how to behave and what it is to be a member of the family. Being a part of a story means being a part of the family, and consequently, not being a part of a story means not being a member of the family. This is exemplified in the story of the 'no-name woman' in which Maxine creates a story herself because her mother refuses to give the factual information around the story of her father's sister, who has consistently been deleted from any conversation in father's family. Likewise, in the last story 'A Story for a Barbarian Reed Pipe' the Chinese girls are silent in American school, unlike American girls or Chinese women who are talkative and have a very loud voice. Their silence is interpreted by Maxine as if being nothing, neither American girl, nor Chinese woman, while they are actually both at the same time. However, it also shows her at the same time the, by her so despised, obedience of Chinese girls. The object of violence for Maxine provokes an enormous rage in Maxine, only because she behaves as a Chinese girl, silent and extremely shy; the opposite of what Maxine aspires. Although Hong Kingston follows the tradition of Chinese women in talk-stories, her

stories are not received as Chinese anymore by her Chinese readers, because they are full of American imagination (Ya-jie 103). According to Ya-jie a Chinese writer would never have transformed the original mythological stories which exemplifies that the stories are not fully Chinese anymore, but indeed American, although often viewed upon as Chinese by American readers. Shortly said, in her book, Hong Kingston creates a talk-story, a myth herself, full of interpretation and values to be passed on to her readers: a talk-story of Chinese American woman.

6.3 Hybrid language

We're almost there, he keeps saying. *Ya mero*. Almost. *Ya mero*.

– But I have to make *pipí*, Lolo says. –

How much longer is almost? – *Ya mero, ya mero.*” (25)

Sandra Cisneros has a totally different approach than Mukherjee and Hong Kingston on expressing a cultural heritage in her novel. She uses the language often spoken by Mexican Americans, English peppered with Spanish. Cisneros exploits one of the tools to express one self, language, to represent the Mexican American community she has grown up in. Just as the lives of Mexican Americans, partly American partly Mexican, the language is partly English and partly Mexican, bilingual as if bicultural. For Sandra Cisneros language is an important aspect of her life; not only her personal life, but of a broader life in the Mexican American barrio because language expresses a social structure there. “You don't like me when I don't talk. Of what good am I if I won't talk. It's not nice when I don't talk. You might as well be alone.” (*Caramelo* 226) Culture is mediated through language (Gonzalez 4), and therefore characters in Cisneros' books use language a lot. They speak a lot, hear a lot and the language they use symbolises their transient state of being. ”Here them talk and you'll be

mesmerized by the way they think in one language and use the other.” (Stavans 32) The family goes back and forth from Spanish to English like they go back and forth from Mexico to America. Cisneros’ mix of English and Spanish can be seen as a statement of what being an American is, being hybrid. Even though the family speaks half English half Spanish, they are just as a part of the American society as the rest of the American society. Cisneros’ descriptions of the world around Celaya are extremely visual, physical and rhythmical, as if Mexico itself can be seen and felt. Her descriptions are not only a mixture of English and Spanish words, but also the form and sound of dialogue, although in English, is borrowed from the Spanish. “The Reyna sisters, always loud. Making so much noise in English, so much noise with their crooked Spanish.” (225) Cisneros wants to add another style to the American language by using a different rhythm and a system of dialogue borrowed from Spanish (Stavans 32). Also, Celaya constantly translates common Mexican expressions in English, which, all in all, make that the English in the novel sounds strange. The use of loose renditions in neither Spanish nor English and yet both at the same time cover the inter-state of the family, they live in a linguistic state that stands on its own (Stavans 32). Being Mexican lies in small things, things which are excessively described by Cisneros. By adding Spanish words, changing the rhythm and entwining her stories with songs and quotes from telenovelas, her books are not mere a philosophy of Mexican life, but gives the idea that being Mexican can be felt or sensed and is realistic, given from the outside. Celaya the protagonist speaks Spanish, but has been raised in the US, mainly speaking English. Thus in Mexico, she struggles to use the right words in the right time, feeling the enormous difference: “I scramble downstairs to tell everyone, only I don’t have the words for what I want to say. Not in English. Not in Spanish.” (Cisneros in *Caramelo* 60) Her inability to use both languages equally, makes her aware of subtle meanings and aware of her own difference in Mexico. Regularly she comes across a mismatch between tongues (Gonzales 16) and therefore a

mismatch between identities. Her language in America is considered to be too Spanish, but in Mexico her Spanish is regarded as being below standards. On the other hand, she also escapes the boundaries formed by a single language; she rises above it and is able to criticise both cultures (Gonzalez 5) and makes her more aware of her own identity and her self-consciousness rises (Gonzalez 10). The strange sound of the language in the novel “plunge[s] the reader [...] in an ethical confrontation with difference” (6) but also with correctness. Since the English language in the novel is strange and different, it makes the reader aware of what correct English is and what not. “Through her acts of translation, Celaya strives to become aware of the surprise of otherness, of a difference that helps her to imagine her world, differently.” (Gonzales 16) It is a way of looking at the world and actively deleting or adding aspects and meanings to it just like Hong Kingston and Mukherjee have done in their fiction.

6.4 Conclusion

The own identity the female writers have is partially created by their own history and partially through cultural bounds in their ancestral culture. Cisneros’ mix of Spanish and English is a well-know language in the barrio she grew up in. It was one of the main aspects to recognise Mexican Americans. Hong Kingston’s talk-stories full of mythology are seen as typical Chinese and Mukherjee’s novel, full of rejections towards Indian fate is a clear rejection of old world India itself and an embrace of new world America.

Using a literary strategy that has been an important aspect in their ancestral culture and mixing it with American aspects represents on the one hand a shared cultural background with a specific American group, but on the other hand a personal approach towards the questions who you are and what makes you an American.

The transient state of being the women are in is symbolised in Mukherjee’s novel by her transient naming, throwing away destiny and at the same time being unable to flee from

destiny, in Hong Kingston's work it can be found in the invention of an own mythology like her mother and grandmother etcetera do, and in Cisneros' work it is the importance of the language in Mexican American society that has been made transient. All three writers long for an imaginary homeland, which is neither here, nor there. They try to integrate reality and fantasy. Old certainties passed on through old literary strategies, hybrid language, mythology and fate are questioned, challenged and reformed in the form of stories.

7. Journey to self

When people travel, they can decide where to go. They are not stuck to where their birth has placed them, but actively and independently move on to there where they want to be. During the trip they discover new landscapes and learn about new cultures. A journey can be made physically or mentally. In all three books, travelling is an important factor in the lives of the protagonists. The travels are on the one hand used as a metaphor for their process from innocent girl to experienced woman and on the other hand as a literal metaphor for the girls' shift between the two different cultures they hover between. Throughout history travelling has been a natural metaphor for the learning process in the view of the fact that travellers literally and figuratively explore new things and open up new horizons. Travelling has recently also been seen as a metaphor for diaspora or migration experiences as Janet Wolff or Caren Kaplan for example mention in their theory (Wolff 227 ; Kaplan ix-xiii). They share the idea that diaspora, migration, and travelling in general force the traveller to deconstruct fixed points-of-view in order to build up new perspectives.

In *Caramelo*, the summer holidays to Mexico are the central theme, but also the family's move to San Antonio and attempt to build up a new life there is a major step in Celaya's adolescent life. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist constantly changes and actively forces a change in her sense of being, her identity parallel to her journey from India to and through America. The stories in *The Woman Warrior* do not necessarily express travelling, but in the central story, 'White Tigers', a mythical journey represents Maxine's in her dreams. The protagonists' crossing of boundaries can be seen as a metaphor for the mental journey they undergo from naive young women or little girl into a strong independent hybrid woman. The travels from one place to the other, with all the obstacles, experiences and knowledge literally follow the girls' mental transition. They start out from their non-American family, with all its habits, ideas and traditions, and finally reach the American world, but with the knowledge of

their inherited culture. Identical to *bildungsromans*, or coming-of-age novels, these three novels are built around protagonists who experience and learn during their journey becoming a self.

Hong Kingston's 'White Tigers' covers the same thematic difficulties as Mukherjee's *Jasmine*: go somewhere unknown and "survive bare-handed" (Hong Kingston 29). Or as Mukherjee says it: "it took me a decade of painful introspection [...] to make the transition from expatriate to immigrant [and it] has not been easy" (American Dreamer 33), expressing the often violent struggle immigrants are faced with. Maxine therefore has to fight her female Chinese American life in the same manner as Fa Mu Lan, the famous mythological young girl in her mother's talk-story, who had to train for and live a life as a female warrior. After the journey, having survived many different hardships as the story goes, the girl is a different person, a warrior, and so is Maxine, who imagines herself to be a warrior.

Jasmine additionally, is in a constant battle, sometimes more violent than other times, to find her new identity, bare-handed. When Jasmine, on her way to America kills the man who raped her, she brutally deconstructs Indian tradition of sati in order to re-establish a new place closer to the cultural centre of America. She then has to adapt to new modes, impressions and social structures at every location she discovers. With every movement she makes, she needs to deconstruct her fixed social structures, learnt habits and insights. She has to reconstruct a new identity from scratch to move from a marginal place to the centre of her social environment.

For Celaya and her family, the holiday trip to Mexico City is laden with chats full of histories, questions and assumptions. During this trip her family's life, and therefore her cultural heritage, is being exposed to both Celaya and the reader. The norms and values of the different family members are expressed in their habits, their talks and their statements. The trip is the ultimate moment to learn to understand each other. The trip offers the chance for

Celaya to get a grasp of her history and thus to discover her identity. When Celaya and her family move house in her adolescent years, it is another moment for Celaya to rebuilt a new social structure in the neighbourhood and at school. Once again she has to adapt and regain her place in society.

A geographical relocation however does not guarantee a release from cultural restrictions. Once the protagonists are set in America, they are still tied to Mexico, China or India. For example, once Celaya is in Mexico, she is still tied to America. These women are not only tied by their cultural bounds, but they are also still tied to their ancestral culture by their surroundings, even though they are located in America. Jasmine is thrown back to the standards of India in the house of Devinder Vadhera in the Indian immigrant community, but also through reactions from her non-Indian American surroundings and family. Celaya lives in Chicago's barrio surrounded by Mexican Americans, but also has family who influence her in both America and Mexico. Maxine lives in San Francisco's China town where the women are still bound to their cultural female oppression. Also, her mother's stories are focussed on a Chinese upbringing. Sometimes, living in these surroundings forces these three women to behave in a manner that they do not want. Jasmine constantly wants to move to another place where she believes her new self can develop. Each and every time she moves on, she throws away her old identity. Maxine moves away from both reality and fixed mythology by moulding stories in her dreams to her own liking and Celaya moves to understand her cultural heritage. The further away she is, the better she seems to understand her history.

The three protagonists are transgressing cultural borders by crossing physical and mental boundaries. For the Mexican family it is physically fairly easy to travel to Mexico, so it can be done both ways to and from Mexico. For Jasmine the travel is a one way trip and for Maxine's parents it has also been a one way trip. Maxine however, has not even seen China, the only way she gets to know it is by stories and therefore travelling is only part of the talk-

stories. Nevertheless, for all women travelling, whether this is as a tourist, a migrant or a dreamer, is necessary to go on in their lives. Their journey can give a new perspective but it can also be confusing because the distance can lead to insight while at the same time it can also be illusory (Kaplan x). Travelling therefore causes destabilisation through a shift from the safe known world. During the journey the traveller deconstructs her well-known world. By placing herself outside her familiar social surroundings, she takes a critical distance from a given and fixed society in order to make way for a new self created point-of-view. Her own centre thus, has been shifted to the margins, decentred, and she needs to reconstruct her notions on life and ethnicity. At the end of the journey the female traveller has gained new insights, new perspectives and has reconstructed her American life. So, in short it can be said that the protagonists' travels are a metaphor for their journey to self, becoming American. Each trip one step closer to being American.

8. Conclusion

“Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.” (in: Hong Kingston, ‘No Name Woman’ 13)

Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston and Bharati Mukherjee all have different backgrounds but have in common that they stem from a culture different than the American one but at the same time wish to be American. Also, they are all from a patriarchal society that influence the way they perceive their American way of life. How they experience their American life and their background has also had a large influence on their literature.

Being a hyphenated woman in America can cause identity troubles. This can be seen in literature written by marginalised women such as Hong Kingston, Cisneros and Mukherjee. Especially in the cases when the girls or young women in the books wish to behave independently and in an American way, they often face problems with their parents or the rest of their patriarchal community. Hong Kingston, Cisneros and Mukherjee’s protagonists do not wish to behave the way their family wants them to do. As in the stories is represented, it is most often the female part of their family who tell them that the female role is submissive and obedient. Although the protagonists feel a certain loyalty towards their family, they have difficulties living according to the given standards. What makes it even more complicated is that their American surroundings also have expectations they can hardly live up to.

Moreover, Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee have used a first person narrative as a specific literary genre for their novels. In this manner they could express their belief that the notion of being American is a subjective sense of ethnic identity. Also, in using a first person narrative, they emphasise that standardised centre versus margins stereotypes are

subjective concepts as well. They have placed a marginal woman in the centre of their fictional world and have therefore rejected the centre versus periphery stereotypes. Their protagonists experience their surroundings as reality even when there are large discrepancies with common notions of reality. The writers have therefore set reality as a subjective and multi-interpretable notion. However, it can be concluded that even though the stories are highly personal and subjective, they are paradoxically received as general and real stories. Therefore, any American woman who reads these stories might recognise herself in aspects from the books. This gives her a clear view on not only the similarities but also on the differences that distinguishes every American woman, of whatever descent she might be. The narrators in the stories do not know what being an American is, even though they are a part of that society. What they eventually do know is who they are and what they want to do with all the information they gained from all cultures they have received through life. It is important not to be Mexican, Chinese or Indian, but American, because being American means having a history that has its roots elsewhere. Besides, it means that not your ancestral world, family or social traditions and social status can create you, but you can do that yourself. Although their choices might not be easy, they are definitely preferred by the protagonists in the books. Thus, following Ika's theory, readers have to rely on a dynamic concept of identity while reading Cisneros, Hong Kingston and Mukherjee, who have helped defining American literature and its historical discourse as a multi-voiced narrative.

Since the female protagonists sense they live in two worlds, they experience that their life is the sum of several fragments. They are not alone in the struggle to create a unity. Literature regularly describes people's need for a narrative structure to create ethnic sense. Fragments here can be found in both story and life that are a fusion of several elements of languages, names, cities, stories and dreams. The fragmented stories reflect the protagonists' fragmentary sense of identity. Whereas the stories contain fragments, the three protagonists

create a new narrative structure with the help of language and dreams. This brings them in conflict with both worlds they live in and mirrors the hybrid world they live in.

Although American, the writers stem from a culture that has an influence on their life. This culture is expressed in their novels through an aspect defining that same culture. Thus, Mukherjee expresses the Indian belief in fate and destiny she struggles against in *Jasmine*, Hong Kingston uses her mother's and grandmother's talk-stories to pass on her personal myth and Cisneros writes her book in a hybrid language, expressing the hybrid language used in the barrio many Mexican Americans grew up in. Using a literary strategy that has been an important aspect in their ancestral culture and mixing it with American aspects represent the way the protagonists deal with their marginality and reflects a new sense of identity.

Travelling in the books and stories is not only a literal trip from one place to the other, but the trips are more a metaphor for the inner struggle and journey to self-knowledge. The hardships of a physical trip are almost necessary to understand what it is to be a woman with a double marginality in a patriarchal and Anglo-American society, but also what it is to have cultural bounds outside America. While travelling the protagonists deconstruct old ties and reconstruct new identities.

These stories are no alike, but they share certain features. As shown in this essay they resemble in the features as described above: womanhood and loyalty, a narrating-I, fragments and travelling in order to become what you have chosen to be. However, they differ in one specific literary stylistic aspect: that aspect that binds them to their heritage in Mexico, China or India that defines their cultural background.

The central questions from the beginning, namely what is mine, what is tradition and what is American, sorted out to be the main questions for the writers and their protagonists. Their stories seemed to be their search for an answer. They expose and explore the inner world of young women who seem to participate in the Anglo-American society but also live

in conflict with it. The three writers have a different strategy, but they each tell the story of a woman who liberates and reinvents herself while balancing two very different cultures. Being an American woman is shaped by a subjective sense and formed with an inherited culture developing into American modern life: being an American woman means actively becoming one. In their prose Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros and Bharati Mukherjee do not only represent their personal struggles in their search for an American identity, it can also be said that they represent the larger discussion about the place multicultural identities have in American society.



Bharati Mukherjee



Maxine Hong Kingston



Sandra Cisneros

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Endnotes

ⁱ Mukherjee uses the concepts old and new world to determine the following: the old world is a hierarchical world, with a fixed exclusivist, national identity and the new world is a world in which people believe that someone's station in life is not determined. (Mukherjee in *American Dreamer* 34 , *Beyond Multiculturalism* 7)

ⁱⁱ As mentioned in amongst others: Hong Kingston in *Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers*, Schlosser, Ruppel, Mukherjee in *American Dreamer*, Benson, Birnbaum.