Chapter II

Transgression of Gender Boundaries

In Search of a Viable Female Self

*Culture professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles (Gloria Anzaldúa).*

Fiction and autobiography written by women from diverse ethnic backgrounds demonstrate not only the great cultural diversity such women writers experience but also show the incompatible definitions of femininity and the diametrically opposed demands a woman is likely to encounter as she attempts to live in more than one cultural world at the same time. Women like Kingston and Cisneros, who are doubly marginal (i.e. not a member of the dominant race or gender) are likely to feel this conflict with particular acuteness because their affiliation with a minority culture tends to be strong. They struggle to reconcile the loyalty to their Chinese American and Chicano/a heritage, a background which devalues and even insults women, with their own sense of dignity as women. The gender roles assigned by their ethnic communities and the dominant culture are equally abhorrent to them. Their personal struggles are fought and won by embracing their roles as writers, by choosing to express their own points of view and by finding the right words and right voice. The core of their problem is that by being simultaneously insiders (women who identify with their cultural heritage and with some of the precincts of Anglo culture) and outsiders (women who rebel against both traditions), they cannot
form the right perspective for a long time. It is only through mastery of literary form and technique—through creating autobiographies and fictions out of family stories, myths and memories and by delving into the history of their communities—that they are able to articulate their own ambivalence and thereby find viable female identities.

As Deborah L. Madsen points out in *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* women of colour are often treated as ‘the other’ in mainstream feminist discourse. Women of colour have recognized that they have to deal with issues other than faced by white middle-class women. The oppression of women due to their racialised sexuality has resulted in the emergence of Black Feminism, Chicana/Hispanic Feminism, Native Feminism and Asian Feminism with distinct theoretical perspectives. This “racialised feminist perspective recognizes the feminist issue of ‘double consciousness’: the perceived contradiction between what is in oneself and the cultural image imposed by the racism of others, a contradiction that prevents women of colour achieving full subjectivity or selfhood” (Madsen 213).

The phrase ‘double consciousness’ describes the oppression of the individual both as a woman and as a member of an ethnic minority. Women of colour have to articulate their own distinct experiences in literary and theoretical discourses by constructing individual feminist voices with which to speak to white women as well as men. Gloria Anzaldúa explains the manner in which Chicanas are oppressed by the cultural imperative that women remain silent and invisible within traditional Chicano culture. Even the language that is available to these women expresses masculine rather than
feminine consciousness: “Chicanas use *nostros* whether we’re male or female. We are robbed of female being by the masculine plural” (Anzaldúa 76). Maxine Hong Kingston makes the same point in *The Woman Warrior* when she explains that the word for ‘female I’ is also the word for ‘slave’: “There is a Chinese word for the female I – which is “slave”. Break the women with their own tongues!” (WW 47). At the same time what is considered as ‘American feminine’ is not acceptable for Kingston and Cisneros. What they strive for is a middle state where Bhabha’s analogy of the stairwell becomes relevant, dangling between two cultural ideologies. What Gloria Anzaldúa says is significant in this context: “…it is not that I reject everything that has to do with white culture. I like the English language, for example. And there is a lot of Anglo ideology that I like as well. But not all of it fits with our experiences and cultural roots” (Anzaldúa 234)

Notions on gender and the resultant patterns of behaviour prevailing in the ethnic cultures of Kingston and Cisneros have built certain walls around which prevent them, at first, from realizing their true selves. The pull of the Anglo culture also further confuses them. The polarized attitude of their families towards boys and girls set up a framework of boundaries and limits that influences the protagonists' development from the start. Cisneros and Kingston construct these limits with an emphasis on the traditional roles for boys and men in opposition with the dutiful realm imposed on girls and women. They learn to undermine the crippling effects of their ethnic culture and the dominant white cultural ethos on their psyche. The selected four works of Kingston and Cisneros show
how assigned gender roles can be subverted or reversed. In Kingston’s novels there are several instances of gender crossing taking place.

Sandra Cisneros in *Caramelo* shows how imposed cultural silence should be ignored in order to be empowered. The alternate title given to the Disclaimer inserted in the first page of Caramelo “I DON’T WANT HER, YOU CAN HAVE HER, SHE’S TOO HOCICONA [loudmouth] FOR ME” signals the cultural context in which she, as a Chicana writes this book. Old world Mexican cultural tenets traditionally silence women’s voices and viewpoints, particularly in public sphere. A traditional *marianista* woman always remains submissive to the men in her life, who are correspondingly imbued with *machista* models of manhood. These two general categories of gender norms allow a cultural privileging of the male over the female. Centuries of this dynamic have placed a common yoke of silence on Chicanas, stereotyping them as “hociconas” [loudmouths] should they step outside of traditional lines and venture to speak. The generational handing down of these polarized gender norms makes them particularly difficult to ignore in a culture that centres on family ties and closeness. The female role models offered to Celaya Reyes (Lala), the young Chicana narrator and protagonist in *Caramelo*, by her mother, aunt, and grandmother all overtly or subconsciously advocate various tenets of *marianismo*. However, Cisneros presents through Celaya an ingenious way out of the culturally imposed female silence that manipulates the customary family-centred position of Chicanas. As women are allotted authority within the realm of home and family, speaking in that vein allows Chicanas a space in which to signify; this liminal space can then provide a bridge by which they can move from the space of domesticity into public
discourse.

By assuming the role of family storyteller and thereby exposing family secrets and hidden histories, Celaya uses language (just as language is a powerful weapon in Maxine’s hands in *The Woman Warrior*) to break free from the cultural silence imposed on previous generations of Chicanas by gender categorizations like *machista* and *marianista*. For her, language becomes the means to cultural empowerment. As Linda Hunt observes in the case of Kingston, that her private struggle is fought and won on the battlefield of language, is a comment which is true in the case of Cisneros too. As her stories seek out the lives of her ancestors and search the family roots, they enable her to actually strengthen family ties and still gain her independence.

In *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldúa identifies the longstanding location of the Chicana woman as merely a part of the family unit, rather than an autonomous being. In Chicano culture focus is on the communal more than the individual well-being—a cultural trait shared by other Latino communities—duty to family surpasses the wants or aims of individuals in Chicano culture, regardless of gender. However, Anzaldúa emphasizes the intensely heightened expectations of self-sacrifice that are placed upon women. She writes, “In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue” (Anzaldúa 40). The societal danger, which is Anzaldúa’s primary concern, begins when these characteristics are imposed upon women specifically as the only acceptable manifestations of femininity. When women must bow to the needs of the family in all
instances, especially when men are not expected to do the same, they cannot grow into individual persons. They are not culturally validated. They are silenced.

The duty to family before self underscores the various tenets of marianismo laid out in *The Maria Paradox* by Gil and Vasquez. They argue that in trying to imitate the Virgin Mary, Latinas have been and continue to be oppressed, especially Latinas living in the U.S., who are trying to negotiate between conflicting cultural messages. On the one hand they see the possibility of entering the public sphere modeled by women in the U.S., yet because they desire to stay close to their Latino roots they often feel unable to step outside marianista boundaries. In their book, Gil and Vasquez list what they call, the “The Ten Commandments of Marianismo”-

1. Do not forget a woman’s place. 2. Do not forsake tradition. 3. Do not be single, self-supporting, or independent-minded. 4. Do not put your own needs first. 5. Do not wish for more in life than being a housewife. 6. Do not forget that sex is for making babies—not for pleasure. 7. Do not be unhappy with your man or criticize him for infidelity, gambling, verbal and physical abuse, and alcohol or drug abuse. 8. Do not ask for help. 9. Do not discuss personal problems outside the home. 10. Do not change those things which make you unhappy that you can realistically change (Gil 8).

Each of these shows a real life manifestation of the way marianismo translates into the lives of Latinas, denying them autonomy and culturally silencing them.
Marianismo restricts female identity to becoming a wife and a mother. Most cultures view marriage and motherhood as positive life situations. This may be especially true in Latino (including Chicano) cultures because of the respect and admiration attributed to mothers. This list emphasizes the lack of self-realization allowed to women when the cultural superstructure confines them to the private sphere and prohibits them from speaking out against the system. It is difficult for Chicanas to defy these tenets because they seem to be a fundamental piece of their cultural identity. Under this set of rules, Chicanas are kept submissive and quiet.

Weighed down by these long established traditions, Chicanas today still struggle for autonomy in ways that contemporary Anglo women do not—living alone, for example. A “good” marianista Mexican or Chicana daughter does not leave home until she marries because she sees her duty to her family as foremost, attending to her parents and siblings before marriage and to her husband and children after marriage. To become independent and live alone is seen as offensive to the family, culturally deviant, and at the very least, unfeminine. In this respect, then, to live on one’s own is unthinkable. In Caramelo, Celaya faces the same culturally cemented attitudes toward a woman’s self-determination outside these marianista strictures when she asks her father about moving out to try living alone someday. He replies:

If you leave your father’s house without a husband you are worse than a dog. You aren’t my daughter. You aren’t a Reyes. You hurt me just talking like this. If you leave alone you leave like, and forgive me for saying this but it’s true, como
una prostituta [like a prostitute] . . . How will you live without your father and brothers to protect you? One must strive to be honorable (360).

Although the care and protection of women partially motivates these machista attitudes in someone like Celaya’s father, who wants to protect her from the disdainful opinions of those Chicana/os, who would question her moral standing and femininity, this machista mindset also inhibits the absolute acceptance of women as complete and wholly formed human beings. Deeply rooted gender expectations deny these Chicanas the full identity formation that they crave.

Despite the many diatribes against machismo and the quintessential male oppressors found in the texts of past feminist discussions on the marginalized position of Latinas, the startling fact is that women are the most dominant force in continuing these biased traditions. Cultural formation primarily occurs during childhood and in the home, and in most of the Latino homes, women (usually mothers) contribute a more influential presence than men do. While they most likely teach some lessons purposely, mothers also mould their children by the mere action of daily living, teaching by example. Thus, Chicana mothers tend to both actively and passively reinforce the marianista traditions that were drilled into them at an early age.

Cisneros demonstrates the generational continuity of gender expectations in Caramelo in regard to the sexual freedom allotted to young men and the silencing of young women concerning their own bodies. When Soledad, Celaya’s grandmother,
becomes a live-in maid at the Reyes household, the son of the house molests her. Cisneros expresses this tradition of males controlling sex, writing Soledad’s thoughts like this, “Was she not ‘la muchacha’ after all, and was it not part of her job to serve the young man of the house?” (156). Later, Soledad repeats this practice, when her son, Inocencio, fathers an illegitimate child by their washer woman. Marianista women cannot pass on traditions—like female autonomy—that are completely foreign concepts to them. As both boys and girls are indoctrinated with traditional gender roles from a very early age, they continue to revitalize these traditions in their adult lives, and the cycle continues.

Not only do Chicanas reaffirm marianista tendencies through their own actions and teachings in the home because they are unfamiliar with the alternatives, they also find a culturally validated space as mothers which grants them a degree of authority otherwise denied them. Much like the Virgin who serves as their supreme role model, women in Mexican and Chicano/a cultures attain a degree of respect akin to sanctity, as long as they play by the rules and become wives and mothers. Because traditional Chicanas must act submissively toward the men in their lives, they often become overly authoritative within the domestic sphere, in which they are culturally allowed and even expected to take control. Exerting authority in the home helps in releasing all pent up feelings. Both of the major mother figures in Caramelo, Soledad (the Awful Grandmother) and Zoila (Celaya’s mother) reflect this supremacy in the home. Zoila, for example, “shouts good and loud” (364) at Celaya when she accuses her mother of favouring her sons, threatening “two good conks on your head with my chancla [sandal]” (364). Yet, when Zoila’s husband
decides to move the family to San Antonio and buys a house there without consulting her, she “is as wild as if she’d won the lottery” (299). She seems surprisingly unbothered by being excluded from a major life decision. These mothers demand complete obedience to their orders in the domestic sphere, yet they paradoxically relegate all of the decision-making power outside of their domain to the men in their lives, mainly their husbands.

In these situations, Chicanas embody the complications of trying to emulate the Virgin Mary. While the Virgin is the silent sufferer, she also exerts great power over the lives of her devotees. It is a complex, perhaps even impossible, role for an ordinary human being to fulfill. Gloria Anzaldúa addresses the ambivalence of female roles in Chicano culture when she writes, “Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages. . . . Which was it to be—strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming?” (40). While they want their daughters to succeed, Chicanas feel uncomfortable endorsing behaviours that would belie longstanding gender norms. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, another renowned Chicana feminist, draws upon experiences with her own mother and writes “as a woman of her own time, a product of unresolved conflicts and ambivalence about her preordained role as a mother and as a woman, she tried to prohibit me to read because to her the physical inactivity of reading signified laziness in a girl” (8). In Saldívar-Hull’s home, as in so many Chicano homes like hers, formal education for females was seen as superfluous; girls needed only to perfect the vocational skills of a housewife. Thus, Chicanas lose the opportunity to develop their skills in asserting their voices in public discourse.
Closeness within not only the nuclear but also the extended family stands out as one of the most admirable and foundational traits of Latino cultures. Still, these strong bonds can paradoxically subjugate women, imposing limitations that inhibit their personal progression. Chicanas often feel they are faced with the decision to become good marianistas and be accepted in their families and communities, or become independent and be rejected by them. As exemplified in the previously cited passage from Caramelo when Celaya’s father challenges her desire to move away from home by herself, independent women risk hurting their family members, being seen as pretentious, or having their moral uprightness questioned (like being called a prostitute). Gender patterns are passed on as a major part of the cultural economy, and as such they are extremely hard to escape if one wishes to preserve her Chicana identity. Celaya appears to fit the category of a young Chicana presented with marianista role models, both subconsciously and openly forced upon her since birth. Escaping these trends seems nearly impossible, yet somehow Celaya has managed to write this historical family narrative, thus stepping out of traditional female gender roles and entering the public sphere. Some of the female figures in her life—Aunty Light-Skin and the Awful Grandmother—exhibit various marianista tenets matching “The Ten Commandments” referenced above from The Maria Paradox.

But in the case of her mother Zoila, Cisneros presents a clash between the values of diasporic Mexican Americans and the traditional mores and attitudes of the Mexican middle class. Cisneros delights in creating non-stereotypical Latina characters and in some respects accomplishes her task with Zoila, Lala’s mother. Zoila is non-religious, is
interested in politics, speaks better English than her husband, and therefore attends to some of the more practical communications in the public sphere. However, even Zoila, as a Chicana of the older generation, fits into the marianista mould in certain aspects that are not traits inherent in her personality, but manifestations of the times and circumstances in which she lives. She dedicates herself completely to the role of housewife. Even when the family needs more income, her husband scoffs at the idea of her becoming a working woman, saying, “What! A wife of mine work? Don’t offend me” (289)! Most of the time when she appears in the book, she is cleaning, cooking, or waiting on her husband. In one instance, Celaya comments, “Mother has steak sizzling on one burner, tortillas on another, and on another she’s reheating frijoles for Father’s dinner” (400). She accepts this role as her normal station in life, even though her innate personality seems more independent-minded or rebellious. Cultural silencing in her identity formation has weighed heavily on her ability to express her true emotions to her loved ones. She has not arrived at the liminal state, which later on, her daughter achieves.

Language is a barrier for Zoila because of the marianista values she has been taught, so she often “speaks” through food, a culturally acceptable medium. As one of the main female duties in the home, cooking is an acceptable behaviour for a woman in Chicana culture. In some parts of Caramelo, putting feelings into food preparation mediates the articulation of feelings, a connection that recalls Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children. Though many Chicanas may be comfortable expressing themselves through language, for some it is problematic, whereas food as a discourse is culturally validated. It allows a woman to express herself without the use of spoken language, which
can be perceived as too openly assertive. Zoila’s case may be extreme as she even has difficulty using language to show love or praise. Rather than communicating her feelings to her husband directly, Zoila mumbles as an aside, “He works hard” (401), as she “slices an avocado and chops some cilantro . . . tucking the tortillas into a clean dishcloth” (401). The earlier incident of Inocencio’s birthday party proves that Zoila’s behaviour is not an isolated incident; Soledad also expresses her love for her son through food preparation for him. “It’s Father’s birthday. All week the Grandmother has been marketing for everything herself . . . to buy the freshest ingredients for Father’s favourite meal—turkey in the Grandmother’s mole sauce” (47). A lifetime of being culturally validated for domesticity rather than words makes food a comfortable discourse for Mexican and Chicana women. It is not that either of these women is literally silent; on the contrary, they both scold and shout constantly, but when they need to communicate deep personal feelings, they often employ the tools available to them—cooking being one. Cisneros’s use of food as a form of language mirrors her tactic in Caramelo as a whole—asserting a voice through the culturally safe domain of the home.

As Chicano/a families are prone to include close interaction with extended as well as immediate family members, Celaya’s aunts serve as models of femininity for her, especially her Aunty Light-Skin in Mexico. This aunt’s situation illustrates the binding nature of following in the Virgin’s footsteps as a silent sufferer. In the end, her attempts to imitate the Virgin land her paradoxically in the position of a kept woman, basically the whore of the Virgin/whore dichotomy. (This is also referred to as the Ave/Eva duality, based upon the legacies of the two most prominent women in Christianity: the Virgin
Mary and Eve. “Ave” refers to the Virgin, who, despite being married to Joseph and bearing children by him, Catholics praise for her eternal virginity, which they equate with purity. “Eva” recalls the first woman Eve, who—in the Catholic paradigm—tempted Adam with her inherent sexual immorality and caused the human race to fall from God’s grace, introducing thereby evil and suffering into the world. This dualistic view of woman translates secularly into contemporary Chicano culture in that women are seen as naturally purer than men, but with an underlying potential for lasciviousness, so that if a woman transgresses societal rules she immediately becomes a “bad” woman. Aunty Light-Skin tells Celaya that after she discovered that her husband had been cheating on her, she looked to the Virgin for answers. She says “I even went to la basílica to ask la Virgencita for this strength . . . I lit a candle and prayed with all my soul, like this, ‘Virgencita, I know he’s my husband . . . he disgusts me. Help me to forgive him’ ” (272).

She embodies the marianista admonition against questioning her man about his behaviour and asserting her rights to complete fidelity and respect. Even when she forgives him, he leaves anyway, resulting in a constant buzz of gossip among the other women about whether or not they ever were married and about her current relationship with her boss. When she first appears in the novel, Aunty Light-Skin works for Señor Vidaurri, purportedly as a secretary, but she also questionably receives fancy clothes, a weekly allowance for her child, and rides to work with her boss. Her futile attempt to be humble and submissive like the Virgin leads her to fall to the level of a mistress. There is no feasible way out of the bind. The cultural silence placed upon her obstructs her
development into an autonomous person. Instead of being her own person, Aunty Light-Skin passively receives the treatment of the men around her, letting them mould her persona and life circumstances.

The Awful Grandmother assumes the most powerful female presence in Celaya’s consciousness as she writes down the family (hi) stories. The grandmother’s voice becomes close to a second narrator as they have meta-textual conversations—interruptions in the actual storyline in which Celaya and the grandmother pointedly refer to and negotiate about the construction of the text itself (again reminding one about *Midnight’s Children*). Through this character, Cisneros explores some of the most entrenched cultural gender norms of both [*machismo*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machismo) and [*marianismo*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marianismo). For one, Celaya’s grandmother has been relegated to a life of housework and sacrifice for her children, in which she takes great pride. In addition, her story illustrates the sexual quandary that Chicanas face. Their overemphasized biological function as mothers conflicts with expectations that females should forever maintain a virginal state of purity and innocence. Somehow Chicano culture overlooks the same discrepancy in the life of the Virgin Mary, who traditional women are supposed to imitate. Men, on the contrary, are allowed sexual freedom; in fact, *machista* society condones male infidelity as a healthy sign of masculinity. Men are allowed, even expected, to be sexual beings while women should indulge in sex for the sole purpose of having children. Celaya also points out how Spanish at times exchange the word for "child" and the word for "son." The novel thus tries to make us aware of how this implicit infantilization works for the continual fetishization of male children in the culture: “There is nothing Mexican men revere more
than their mamas; they are the most devoted of sons, perhaps because their mamas are the most devoted of mamas . . . when it comes to their boys" (128).

The son can always expect his love to be reciprocally returned by the mother. The Virgin Mary gains much of her authority because she suffers for her children, who are also her followers. In trying to emulate her, Chicanas feel they can only signify by sacrificing all of their own personal needs and fulfilling the needs of their husbands and children. A great part of these marianistas’s toil comes in the form of housework, dedicating oneself to the daily chores necessary in running a household. The Awful Grandmother demonstrates these qualities perfectly. Speaking of the week-long food preparations for her grown son’s birthday party, the grandmother says, “To make food taste really well, you’ve got to labor a little . . . and grind till your arm hurts, that’s the secret” (54). She feels she will be admired for her suffering, just like the Virgin. Showing how deeply ingrained these traditions are in Celaya’s grandparents, Cisneros creates the following conversation between them: “What do you men know [about cooking]? Why, your own father’s never even entered my kitchen. Isn’t that so, Narciso? —“I don’t even know what colors the walls are, the Grandfather says, chuckling” (54). As she has been denied a societal role outside of her home, she thrives on the authority that she gains as the ama de casa (boss of the house). The kitchen is her designated space. She takes possession of it willingly as one of the few areas in which she can exist independently, and her husband willingly relegates it to her because strict machismo classifies an interest in domesticity as effeminate. Both Narciso’s machista attitudes and Soledad’s personal formation as a marianista took root in her life at an early age. As the
servant girl in Regina’s household, Soledad learned her place in Narciso’s life. Although her actual servant status may be an extreme case, she represents the traditional primary duties of Mexican women in domestic chores. As a wife and mother these duties govern her life, and therefore she clings to them in order to gain the respect her culture affords her in that role. Being a mother is being somebody. Indeed, Cisneros writes, “Men no longer looked at her, society no longer gave her much importance after her role of mothering was over” (347). For this reason, she obsessively continues to sacrifice for her sons, especially Lala’s father who is the eldest, even into her old age. She is grasping at the last straws of what has been her identity.

Lala’s narration reveals that as a result of the multiple absences in Soledad’s life and the lack of a language of self-expression, Soledad models her behaviour after Regina Reyes, her employer, her future mother-in-law, and her pseudo-surrogate mother. Cisneros draws striking similarities between Regina and Soledad, just as she does between Soledad and Lala. Regina was the daughter of a porter who carried heavy loads on his back. In addition, she was of Mexic-Amerindian descent, “was as dark as cajeta and as humble as a tortilla” (116), and sold “papaya slices . . . with lemon and a dash of chile” (117). Her marriage to the lighter-skinned, better-educated Spaniard Eleuterio Reyes (after he impregnates her with Narciso) inaugurates the Reyes familial history in the “new world.” Like Regina, Soledad has an Indian background that ethnically and racially marks her: “It must be remembered that Soledad was a Reyes too, although of that backward Indian variety that reminded Regina too much of her own humble roots” (113). Also like Regina, Soledad comes from a lower class than the
Reyes men, of which fact Regina constantly reminds her: “The clothes, the gifts of things la Señora Regina didn’t want anymore made Soledad feel worse for having to accept and wear them. —Now, Soledad, you’ll see. There’s no need to thank me. You can’t help it if you were raised wiping your ass with corn shucks and wandering about without shoes” (115).

Lala’s narration not only underscores the similarities between her grandmother and great-grandmother, but also reveals Soledad’s influence in Lala’s assessment of Regina: Lala only knows who Regina is because of Soledad, and Soledad’s opinion of her harsh, critical mother-in-law is anything but sympathetic. Lala’s excavation of her grandmother’s history is indebted to Soledad for both the content it excavates and the structure and language it utilizes to describe the details of Soledad’s past.

One of the most important similarities Lala reveals between the two women is their relationship to the Reyes men. Soledad’s relationship with Narciso transforms her from the “sweet” girl who adores Narciso to the Awful Grandmother. In comparison to the men they marry, both women are of a lower class and due to their Mexic-Amerindian background, are racial and ethnic others whose appearance attracts the Reyes men. Regina “was like the papaya slices she sold with lemon and a dash of chile; you could not help but want to take a little taste” (117), and Soledad had “those funny Charlie Chaplin eyebrows and the dark little eyes beneath them” (151). Both women are also preyed upon sexually by the Reyes men, impregnated by them, and subsequently married to them due to the men’s obligation to be “gentlemen.” However, whereas
Regina is able to use her shrewd business acumen during the Mexican Revolution to enrich the family and to transform her identity from colonized to colonizer, Soledad is never successful in acquiring an individual sense of self. We see that Soledad learns from Regina an alternate language of self-expression: she learns to be ashamed. Regina essentially transfers her embarrassment regarding her own background onto Soledad as a means to distance herself from it, and in the process she teaches Soledad to be ashamed of her own ethnic, racial, and class identity; this, in turn, leaves her open to seduction by Narciso. Ultimately, as a result of Regina’s teachings and Narciso’s semi-abandonment of her through his affair with another woman, Soledad internalizes Regina’s shame and repeats the strategies her mother-in-law used to deflect it by blindly loving and idolizing her eldest son while ridiculing the inadequacies of her domestic help, her daughters-in-law, and her grandchildren. Instead of “remembering” her dead mother’s creativity, Soledad adopts the venomous posture that alienates her from her family. In those parts of the story Lala narrates in the present tense, Lala does not know her grandmother’s history, and until their fateful conversation over Inocencio’s hospital bed, she understands Soledad only as the Awful Grandmother. Accordingly, Lala repeats her grandmother’s history because she does not know it. Lala’s blundering repetition of her grandmother’s mistakes occasions the need for her excavation project in the first place. Her family’s repeated movements across the US-Mexico border and within the United States also leave Lala confused about her identity. Cisneros shows that Soledad’s and Lala’s migrations inhibit their formation of a strong sense of ethnic female identity; as a consequence, they are vulnerable and are both seduced by men who leave them empty and abandoned in different ways. Cisneros uses Lala’s gender, ethnic,
and racial difference to show that, like Soledad, she does not fully belong anywhere until she learns and recounts her grandmother’s story.

According to her grandmother, she is not sufficiently feminine. The Awful Grandmother tells her before she dies, “You look like a sheep dog. The last time I saw you, you were a normal little girl. And now look. You’re as big as a Russian. Don’t you think you should exercise and try to look more feminine?” (258). In Mexico, Lala is not quite Mexican enough because she does not speak Spanish like her father and because she was born in the US, despite the fact that she feels “Mexican on Both Sides” (351). Of course, Soledad thinks it is a “barbarity” that only one of her grandchildren, Lala’s brother, speaks fluent Spanish. In Chicago, she is a poor, racial, and ethnic other. In San Antonio, deep in the heart of Aztlán, her Chicana peers call her a *gabacha*, a white girl, with unintentional irony because her Spanish is better than theirs and because her grandfather emigrated from Spain to Mexico. Lala’s response to this name-calling is typically amusing: “Who wants to be called a white girl? I mean, not even white girls want to be called white girls” (354). She is not at home in both worlds, neither in Chicago nor in Mexico. She acutely feels her in-between condition in this stage.

Cisneros subtly plants the seeds of gender insurrection in Celaya’s character by making her inept at all but the simplest household tasks, thereby constructing her as a misfit in her culturally designated role. When Celaya gets a job at her Catholic school, she has to quit because she cannot satisfactorily perform the domestic services for the priests which she is assigned. She has to go and explain to them, “How my mother says
I’m no good for anything in the kitchen unless it’s burning rice. How I can’t even iron my own clothes without scorching them. How I need strict supervision anytime I sew anything, . . . I’m not meant for the kitchen even though I’m an only daughter” (322).

Even though she has been trained by her female relatives to see that housework is an inherent part of womanhood, Lala feels inadequate in that aspect. By refusing to perform these duties as a formal job, she begins to reject the marianista patterns that would limit her possibilities to be anything more than a housewife.

Despite Lala’s lamentations, her lack of privacy and longing for her own room in the apartments in Chicago and the house in San Antonio paradoxically create her narrative ability. By evoking Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, Cisneros engages and revises this spatial metaphor. Woolf imagines this room as a space that both symbolizes and produces female independence. She represents this independence not only as socioeconomic, but also as narrative. In other words, Woolf links the female socioeconomic right to a private space to the female ability to write and to the female ability to tell stories. Cisneros follows Woolf’s feminist ideas in Lala’s desire for a private space within her home. Lala creates what little space she can find in this domestic cacophony by reading-

I’ve pushed two chairs next to the space heater in the dining room, and this is where I’m trying to read a book on Cleopatra. I’ve got no privacy to hear my own thoughts in this stupid house, but I can hear everyone else’s. . . . My Cleopatra
book is a fat one, which is all I ask from a book these days. A cheap ticket out of here. Biographies are the best, the thicker, the better. Joan of Arc. Jean Harlow. Marie Antoinette. Their lives like the white crosses on the side of the road. Watch out! Don’t go there! You’ll be sorry! (332)

Like Woolf, Cisneros reiterates female need for private space. In addition, again like Woolf, Cisneros represents this as a narrative need, as Lala uses her self-created pseudo-private space to read. However, Cisneros revises Woolf’s metaphor; she defines Lala’s storytelling ability not only by her desire for a physical-intellectual space of her own, but also by her inability to attain it. As a matter of fact, the lack of a room of her own does not inhibit Lala’s migratory narrative ability, but rather produces it. In the little privacy Lala carves out in her family’s home, she does not write; instead, she reads. Cisneros presents the creation of Lala’s narrative ability here as consumptive; Lala literally and figuratively consumes the biographies of other women as an imaginative “cheap ticket out of here.” The physical reality of her lived environment accordingly produces her ability to appreciate other women’s “biographies . . . the thicker the better.” In a circular manner, the lack of private space in which she can write her own history produces her desire to consume other females’ histories. In keeping with this moment in the text, we see that Lala’s storytelling ability emerges when she starts narrating her grandmother’s story as a means to tell her own. Lala’s ability to “hear everyone else’s” thoughts in conjunction with her own is a crucial characteristic of her role as a narrator. Her ability to tell her story accordingly depends upon her ultimate understanding that it exists in a dialogical relationship to others’ stories. Cisneros’s revision of Woolf’s
architectural metaphor articulates a mode of female storytelling that is more communal and public than private.

Not only are Chicanas entrapped by the external duties of domesticity, they are often biologically enslaved as mothers at an early age because of the conflicting sexual messages given to women in Latino cultures. Again, this point is exemplified perfectly in the life of the Awful Grandmother. As she reaches pubescence, she notices people begin to tell her to take care of herself, but she does not understand that they are tacitly advising her to abstain sexually. “But they meant to take care of yourself down there. Wasn’t society strange? They demanded you not to become . . . but they didn’t tell you how not to” (153). As it is a cultural taboo, no one speaks to girls about their sexual function. Talking to them about sex might ignite their underlying libidinous natures, turning them into whores who actually enjoy sex rather than only tolerating it. Sandra Cisneros discusses this problem in her essay; “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” in which she calls her culture, “a culture of denial” (48). She describes the unfair sexual roles in the following excerpt:

This is why I was angry for so many years every time I saw la Virgen de Guadalupe, my culture’s role model for brown women like me. She was damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable . . . [The boys] were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and pointed us women toward our destiny—marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was putahood [whore-hood] (48).
The cultural silence imposed upon women regarding their sexuality encourages the virgin/whore dichotomy. There are only black and white options for Chicanas: remain pure by being asexual beings until marriage and maintain even after marriage that sex is only to be used for procreation, or be considered a whore. In *Caramelo*, Soledad becomes pregnant before she ever realizes she has done anything forbidden. Narciso is expected to act upon his sexual desires to fulfill a *machista* stereotype, while she is expected to remain sexually pure despite the complete lack of education given her on the subject or any semblance of protection from Narciso’s sexual advances. Before she can reflect upon her own, Soledad becomes pregnant as an adolescent, leading her directly to the role of motherhood without the chance to complete her own identity formation. Before she can reflect upon her own upbringing in a mature way, she is forced into raising children and teaching them cultural norms. Celaya nearly falls into the same sexual pattern as her grandmother late in the book, but a few minor societal changes redirect her path, mostly the sexual openness of some of the characters who influence Celaya’s adolescent life. Sex becomes a topic that the nuns discuss at school, although expectedly in an erroneous and reticent manner. Celaya’s real sexual education comes from her older, sexually active friend, Viva.

Although she perhaps falls into the category of “whore,” in the end Viva manages to avoid early marriage and pregnancy by pursuing further education. At least Celaya has a rudimentary knowledge of sex before she engages in it; however, she still comes dangerously close to repeating the mistakes of her grandmother—engaging in
unprotected sex at a young age because she thinks she is in love. After the escapade in Mexico with her boyfriend ends, her now dead grandmother appears to her and says, “Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did? There’s no sin in falling in love with your heart and your body, but wait till you’re old enough to love yourself first. How do you know what love is? You’re still just a child” (406).

Because people in Celaya’s life talk to her about her sexuality, she is free to make choices for herself about the future she wants. Rather than discussing sex as merely a physical sensation which is wrong for women to partake of, the Grandmother addresses the emotional and spiritual nature of sexuality that necessitates maturity on the part of those who engage in intercourse. She breaks with machista and marianista tradition in that she does not condemn sex as bad. Instead, she qualifies it as good under the right conditions, thus enabling women to talk about their sexuality and understand it more fully. Breaking the traditional cultural silence about female sexuality gives Celaya the option to become something other than a wife and mother should she choose to do so.

The most poignant evidence that Celaya has broken the silencing patterns of previous Chicana women comes in the last few pages of the book. Her father, representing masculinist societal norms, admonishes her to keep quiet about family matters. As mentioned in the list of marianista tenets by Gil and Vasquez, women are not to discuss family problems outside the home. “Only you have heard these stories, daughter, understand? . . . To mention them makes our family look like sinvergüenzas, understand? You don’t want people to think we’re shameless, do you? Promise your papa you won’t ever talk these things, Lalita. Ever. Promise” (430).
This passage ironically appears on the very last page, after she has just revealed all of the family story by narrating this book—indeed, readers already know she has broken her promise, and they know why she did it. Becoming the family storyteller allows her to overcome the cultural pressure to remain silent and submissive. By revealing family secrets, Celaya frees herself from marianista and machista traditions that would confine her to a life of domesticity in the private sphere and negate her voice in the public sphere. Telling the stories alone may not usher in all of the necessary changes for her to reach complete autonomy, but it is a step in the right direction, a necessary break with the tradition of silence. Delving into her family’s (hi) story may actually prove to strengthen her ties to her family. Thus, her choice to speak out using the family as her subject may allow her to assert her voice without separating herself from the familial bonds that are part of her cultural identity. The inherited marianista and machista attitudes exemplified in Caramelo, as well as in other works, have created a pervasive atmosphere of silence for Chicanas today. Language allows Celaya to overcome cultural silence, as perhaps it could for the many Chicanas who do indeed feel that their voice is barred by gender roles and inherited biases. When Gloria Anzaldúa declares, “Language is a male discourse” (76), her intention is not to prohibit women from speaking. Referring to the slanderous words applied to the women of her culture who transgress the bounds of imposed silence, she writes,

“Hocicona, repelona, chismosa, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being mal criada [poorly raised]. In my culture they are all words that are
derogatory if applied to women—‘I’ve never heard them applied to men’ (76). While men enjoy the freedom to speak about what and whom they will, even in public, female discourse has been restricted in many situations to the private sphere of home and family. Celaya’s father leaks many of the taboo family stories to her, but hypocritically forbids her from speaking of them herself. The fact that she tells the story boldly reveals that she has come to terms with her in-between state. She is neither truly Mexican nor American. She does not remain a true Mexican woman by obeying her father nor does she adopt a typical American persona for herself. Even though she reveals family secrets, she never denies that she is one among them. She succeeds in creating a Third Space for herself by the exploration of the past she conducts. By accepting writing as her profession-- writing being considered a male prerogative-- she is defying the gender roles assigned by both Mexican and American cultures.

In the home Chicanas gain a distinctive type of authority, and it is this unique space that Cisneros has learned to manipulate. With their allotted authority in the domestic space, Chicanas can utilize their expertise with regard to home and family to begin to speak in areas outside of that realm. As the member of the family most affiliated with the day-to-day affairs of the home, women are the logical choice to tell family stories. They are given charge of the family as their cultural role. Cisneros has discussed the empowering nature of storytelling with regard to her own writing. In her interview in *Latina Self-Portraits*, she states, “I realize that a story has the power to quiet a listener, and I develop that. Sometimes it’s an anecdote, but it has to have the power to make people listen” (Kevane et al 48). Telling stories reverses the role of Chicanas as listeners
of others’ opinions and demands, and puts them in the role of speakers who command attention. By combining storytelling with the domain of the family, Cisneros creates a space in which Chicanas, including herself, can speak authoritatively. Cisneros typically bases her literary material in the private sphere and has enjoyed worldwide attention in doing so. She comments in “Writer’s Notebook”, “It seems crazy, but until Iowa [and the Writers’ Workshop] I had never felt my home, family, and neighbourhood unique or worthy of writing about” (72). It is this loophole—using the authority over the domestic sphere which marianista and machista tradition readily gives to ironically break the cultural silencing of women which the same traditions have caused—that Cisneros highlights and explores with her narrator, Celaya. Celaya can escape the silencing of marianismo by utilizing the language available to her in family stories. Despite the generational pattern that her female role models have followed, Celaya is able to safeguard the acceptance from others of her culture and assert her own voice. She refuses to submit to the pressures that would quiet her female voice. Instead, she becomes the family storyteller. By bringing all of these traditions to light, she is able to trace back their roots, actually strengthening the family bond without becoming a marianista. Thus, only by exposing the female oppression in her family through the stories she has been forbidden to tell, can Celaya, along with Cisneros, find her way to empowerment.

In describing the forty-four vignettes that comprise The House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros (1987) has explained in “Do You Know Me? I Wrote The House on Mango Street.” “‘I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation’” (78). Cisneros’s vignettes contain powerfully poetic and often poignantly
haunting images of women: of a young woman entrapped in her home because her husband claims she is “too beautiful to look at”; of women who “sit their sadness on a window” and long for different lives; of a young woman pursuing dreams of higher education amidst fears of “four-legged fur. And fathers.” The central choice between hope and sadness confronts all of the women in the text. Throughout the different stories, Esperanza encounters different versions of femininity and womanhood. To be a woman in Esperanza’s world is a precarious occupation. Women are depicted locked into their houses by possessive husbands, abused, raped and molested. Many of the women in the stories have fallen foul of their sexuality. Suggestive of a social reality in which women’s lives are often constrained by social mores and male violence, these images are juxtaposed against the narrator’s own coming-of-age story. Told through the voice of young Esperanza Cordero who lives in a working-class Latino neighbourhood in Chicago, *The House on Mango Street* reverberates not only with images of women acquiescing to or suffering in their social worlds, but also of vibrant women imagining and inventing alternative psychic and physical spaces.

Both Cisneros and Esperanza embody a complex inheritance and transformation of Latino culture and female identity that are reflective of multiple strands of Latina feminism. Yarbro-Bejarano (1996) defines Latina feminism as a recognition that a Latina’s “experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture(32). Yarbro-Bejarano further contends that the writing and theorizing of Latinas accomplish the dual functions of affirming a sense of solidarity with other oppressed
groups and link women and men in joint struggles for economic and political justice, while also embedding a critique of oppressive gender relations within the Latino community itself. Anzaldúa also calls attention to these multiple identities and sources of oppression for Latinas and argues that a “‘mestiza consciousness’” emerges when women move between and among these forces. As Anzaldúa writes, “‘from this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an ‘‘alien’’consciousness is presently in the making – a new mestiza consciousness . . . It is a consciousness of the Borderlands” (377).

Anzaldúa herself writes from these Borderlands, encouraging other women to draw upon and enact a mestiza consciousness as she describes here: “‘she communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths’” (381). For Cisneros, a similar sense of urgency and purpose animates her writing of the struggles and complexities of her life and that of other Latinas. She asserts in “From a Writer’s Notebook”: “Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession”: There’s no luxury or leisure in our lives for us to write of landscapes and sunsets and tulips in a vase. Instead of writing by inspiration, it seems we write by obsession, of that which is most violently tugging at our psyche (73). Also driven by what is “‘violently tugging at [her] psyche,’” and drawing from the guidance of numerous women in the community, Esperanza begins to understand her vocation as a writer in a manner that keeps her connected to her heritage, but does not foreclose her opportunities for independence and self-fulfilment. McCracken (1999), Salvi’dar (1990), and Olivares (1996) have written persuasively of Esperanza’s evolving recognition of the dialectic
between self and community, emphasizing Esperanza’s growing ‘‘awareness of the connections between the privately created self and its public responsibilities’’ (Saldívar 184).

Cisneros has contended that in her work she is writing against the stereotypes of Latinas and is instead working to illuminate what she calls ‘‘fierce’’ women who are strong despite adversity. In a collection of interviews edited by Jussawalla & Dasenbrock she comments:

I have to say that the traditional role is kind of a myth. I think that the traditional Mexican woman is a fierce woman. There’s a lot of victimization but we are also fierce. We are very fierce. Our mothers had been fierce. Our women may be victimized but they are still very, very fierce and very strong. I really do believe that (300)

With her acute sensitivity to the limitations placed on the women around her and her relentless struggle to construct new possibilities for herself, Esperanza, as her name suggests, is indeed a figure of hope, a ‘‘fierce woman’’ on a complex pursuit for personal and community transformation. In her efforts to find a viable self/identity she succeeds due to her fierceness or strength of character. She does not want to be confined within the narrow limits of the Mango Street – a space representing her ethnic roots-- at the same time after leaving it she is sure that she would come back, a desire which reflects her rejection of Euro-centric American culture. She realizes that she does not
accept the patriarchal values of both cultures. She is neither fully American nor quite Mexican. She embraces what is viable from both cultures and emerges as a Chicana. She is conscious of the borderlands of both cultures and of the liminal position she occupies. This consciousness results in a hybridized feminine identity.

The Third Space or the in-between space Esperanza dwells in is reached from observing the experiences of other women of her community. In fact Cisneros dedicates her work *The House on Mango Street* in Spanish and in English ‘A Las Mujeres/ To the Women’, an action which immediately displays her concern for the angst of the developing protagonist, Esperanza, as well as for other Chicana women. These women represent the cultural boundaries which have served to lock in many Chicanas and other Latina women. A collection of women suffering at the hands of domineering men is portrayed, and also how their experiences help Esperanza achieve the hybrid third space, an ambivalent state which has no ‘primordial fixity or unity’ and which accepts the shifting nature of identity. Cisneros shows that in Esperanza there is scope for improvement or change.

In *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros initiates the woman/man opposition with a selection entitled "Boys & Girls," in which she states: “The boys and girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls. Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friend . . . not ours” (8). Esperanza and Nenny's cultural location is the house, the only place it is considered
suitable for them to interact with boys, brothers who will not acknowledge them outside this familial environment. Cisneros is pointing to the fact that Esperanza and Nenny are potential "window sitters," as are many of the women characterized in this novel. If they follow the cultural norms codified thus far in their lives, they too will adopt the house as their place of activity, thereby limiting their possibilities in life to that which comes to them and reducing their roles in their own lives to passive ones. Esperanza recognizes the danger of this stagnation when she discusses being her great grandmother's namesake: “Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window” (11). Esperanza's interest in her older friend Marin exposes her own voyeuristic nature and willingness to reject certain characteristics of negative female role models. She laments Marin's need to "look beautiful and to wear nice clothes and meet someone in the subway who might marry her and take her to live in a big house far away" (26). Instead of conforming to the numerous examples set by older women in the narration (her own mother included), Esperanza begins her own series of small revolutions which will help to shape her life and give definition to her independence: “My mother says when I grow older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (HMS 88).

The protagonist is unconcerned about the supposed need for feminine wiles and makes a conscious decision to forego the traditional values of her cultures (both Latina and North American). She adds, "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate"
This rebellion is not an effort of a "sisterhood," but rather an individualistic approach that allows for Esperanza's survival in a world not fashioned by or for women. Esperanza refuses to join the ranks of Mexican-American women who serve men. Here you find the intracultural protest against traditional Mexican and Chicano values. The panoply of enclosed and abused women in *The House on Mango Street* begins with the neighbour Rosa Vargas, whose "kids are too many and too much" (29), and "who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come"(29). Then there is Alicia, who fears her father, and Sally, another one of Esperanza's contemporaries, who has flashes of potential but fears the constant sexual abuse imposed by her father. Again, the narrator-protagonist learns a valuable lesson through observation: “And who do you always have to go straight home to after school? You become a different Sally. You pull your skirt straight; you rub the blue paint off your eyelids. You don't laugh, Sally. You look at your feet and walk fast to the house you can't come out from” (82).

Again, the house has become the girl-woman's cultural location. Esperanza's feverish desire for her own, big, self-styled house is a significant indication of the need to break the cycle of female domesticity designed by Mexican culture and to occupy space all her own, one defined by her own loneliness, creativity, and desires.

Esperanza's sister Nenny has a different modus operandi. She knows she is pretty and sees her good looks as an escape from the inferior place she must take within their father's household. The narrator-protagonist comprehends, upon seeing how her sister
navigates her world, that being pretty; she could have her own way. Esperanza narrates: “Nenny says she won't wait her whole life for a husband to come and get her, that Minerva's sister left her mother's house by having a baby, but she doesn't want to go that way either. She wants things all her own, to pick and choose. Nenny has pretty eyes and it's easy to talk that way if you are pretty” (88).

She is neither charmed by Nenny’s plans of future nor is going to end up like other girls and women of Mango Street. For Esperanza, her dream house represents freedom, but she understands that it can be a confining space for women. “The woman’s place is one of domestic confinement, not one of liberation and choice” (Olivares Julian 4). The house is presumably under patriarchal control. Women characters in the novel are often depicted as locked in (Rafaela), abused (like Esperanza’s friend Sally), or confined by domesticity (like Esperanza’s mother). Analysing from this angle, Esperanza’s dream home becomes the metaphor for a female-only space. In the penultimate section, ‘A House of My Own’, Esperanza elaborates:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem(108).

This is Esperanza’s version of Virginia Woolf’s room of her own; a space devoid of female dependency, abuse, shame and noise.
Cisneros’ exploration of different versions of femininity in the novel also provides a commentary upon and critique of historical Chicano myths and stereotypes of womanhood. A dichotomy is constructed in the text between a ‘virgen’ (virgin) and a ‘puta’ (whore)-- two archetypes which derive from two mythological figures in Chicano/a culture, la Malinche, and la Virgen de Guadalupe. La Malinche, also known as Doña Marina or Malintzin, was an aristocratic Aztec woman who was reputed to have betrayed her people by helping to ensure Hernàn Cortés’ conquest of the Aztec Empire at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and she also slept with him. A son resulted from this union, thus producing a ‘mestizo’ (mixed-race) child and subsequently a whole new hybrid race. Thus negatively iconized as a Chicana ’Eve’, a mujer mala (‘bad woman’), la Malinche burdens Chicana culture with a problematic legacy.

Equally problematic to Chicanas is the image and iconography of la Virgen de Guadalupe (the Virgin of Guadalupe). Gloria Anzaldúa argues that la Virgen de Guadalupe is “the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/ mexicano” (30). She adds that she is problematic for Chicanas because ‘she has been used by the Church to meet out institutionalized oppression’ and ‘to make us docile and enduring’ (30). In fact, for Anzaldúa la Malinche, la Virgen de Guadalupe and la Llorona (the weeping woman), together work as “a symbolic triptych. All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two’”(30).
Cisneros manipulates these models of femininity for her own purposes. If female sexuality is often figured as a burden in the text, then it sometimes also offers possible means of manipulating and even controlling patriarchal conditions. When Esperanza and her friends notice the rounding of their hips, they practice wiggling them because, as Esperanza knowledgeably tells her friends, ‘You gotta be able to know what to do with hips when you get them’ (50). Unlike some of the women in the stories, Esperanza realizes the power of her sexuality and the importance of learning to control it. The ‘la Malinche’ figure in the narrative is Esperanza’s friend Sally, whose father says of her that to be ‘this beautiful is trouble’ (81). Sally’s sexual behaviour with the local boys is described by Esperanza as a betrayal in la Malinche–fashion: ‘Sally had her own game’ (96). But unlike la Malinche, Cisneros implicitly suggests that Sally’s actions were a response to her father’s abuse of her, and her mother’s neglect, thus figuring Sally’s promiscuous behaviour as contingent upon circumstances beyond her control and thereby symbolically disrupting the virgen/puta dichotomy. Similarly, the ‘Guadalupe’ figure in the narrative is ‘Aunt Lupe’, Esperanza’s sick aunt, who, while wasting away on her death bed, offers Esperanza encouragement and support by listening to and commenting upon the young girl’s poems. Like la Virgen, she is long-suffering and self-sacrificing, but as with la Malinche, Cisneros connects Aunt Lupe’s suffering with the harsh life of the barrio family, “the kids who wanted to be kids instead of washing dishes and ironing their papa’s shirts, and a husband who wanted a wife again” (61).

What she says concerning her name in the section entitled ‘My Name’, near the beginning of the narrative is significant:
It was my great-grandmother’s name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse- which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female- but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong. . . I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do” (10-11).

It is clear that Esperanza prefers a name not culturally embedded in a dominating, male-centred ideology. She traces the reason for the discomfiture with her name to cultural oppression, the Mexican males’ suppression of their women. As she states in the above quoted section she is named after her Mexican great-grandmother who was wild but tamed by her husband, so that “she looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow…Esperanza, I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (12). The picture we get here is not one of contentment but of sadness. As an individual born in the United States with a Spanish name, ‘Esperanza’ has multiple connotations. In English ‘Esperanza’ literally translates as ‘hope’ and in Spanish the name carries with it family stories and traditions of her Mexican great-grandmother’s life. When she observes her contemporary friends’ domestic entrapment, Esperanza openly refuses the place by the window that her name may traditionally mean. Esperanza encounters gendered “worlds” and forced separation with the ability of men of colour to define women within their respective culture for
“Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong” (HMS 10). The men of colour label women’s strength as “bad”.

The desire to live in a beautiful house is concomitant to finding another identity. But the identity she seeks must be freed from the gender oppression of her culture. In a poetic way, Esperanza traces the reason for the discomfiture with her name to cultural hegemony, the Mexican males’ oppression of their women. In the meantime she feels herself to be like an X, an indeterminate personality in search of an identity. As Maria Elena de Valdés notes,

the narrative situation is a familiar one: a sensitive young girl’s reflections of her struggle between what she is and what she would like to be. The sense of alienation is compounded because ethnically she is a Mexican, although culturally a Mexican American; she is a young girl surrounded by examples of abused, defeated, worn-out women, but the woman she wants to be must be free. The images which are normally associated with a house such as comfort, security, tranquility and esteem are lacking. This is a house that constrains, one that she wants to leave; consequently, the house sets up a dialectic of inside and outside: of living here and wishing to leave for there” (CLC 118:175-81).

The dialectic of inside/outside, of confinement and desire for the freedom of the outside world is expressed in various stories. Marin, from the story of the same name, who is too beautiful for her own good and will be sent back to Puerto Rico to her mother,
who wants to work downtown because you . . . can meet someone in the subway who might marry and take you to live in a big house far away. She never comes out of the house until her aunt comes home from work, and even then she can only stay out in front. She is there every night with the radio . . . Marin under the street light, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall. Someone to change her life. Anybody (27-8).

And then there is Rafaela, too beautiful for her own good: “On Tuesdays Rafaela’s husband comes home late because that’s the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (76).

One way to leave house and barrio is to acquire an education. In “Alicia Who Sees Mice”, a vignette both lyrical and hauntingly realistic, the narrator describes her friend’s life. Alicia, whose mother has died so she has inherited her “mama’s rolling pin and sleepiness,” must arise early to make her father’s lunch-box tortillas:

Close your eyes and they’ll go away her father says, or you’re just imagining. And anyway, a woman’s place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs hidden behind the sink, beneath the four-clawed tub, under the swollen floor
boards nobody fixes in the corner of your eyes (31).

Here is presented a space of misery and subjugation, a dialectic of inside/outside, a Latina’s perception of life— all crystallized in the image of the “tortilla star”. To Alicia Venus, the morning star, does not mean wishing upon or waiting for a star to fall down— as it does for Rafaela, nor romance nor the freedom of the outside world; instead it means having to get up early, a rolling pin and tortillas. Here tortilla is not depicted as a symbol of cultural identity but as a symbol of a subjugating ideology, of sexual domination, of the imposition of a role that the young woman must assume. Here Venus— and the implication of sex and marriage as escape— is de-romanticized, is eclipsed by a cultural reality that points to the drudgery of domesticity. Alicia wisely “studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn’t want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin . . . Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur and fathers”(32 ).

There are two types of girls in Mango Street. There are those few who strive for an education, like Alicia and the narrator, but most want to grow up fast, get married and get out. But these like Minerva, usually have to get married, and they leave a father for a domineering husband. Such is the fate of Sally in “Linoleum Roses”:

Sally got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same. She met a marshmallow salesman at a school bazaar and she married him in another state where it’s legal to get married before the eighth grade . . . . She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape. . . . [Her
husband] won’t let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn’t let her look out the window. And he doesn’t like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working.

She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake (95)

The title “Linoleum Roses” in a subtle way reveals dialectic of inside/outside. “Linoleum Roses is a trope for household confinement and drudgery, in which rose, which traditionally represented beauty, femininity, garden (outside) and also is a metaphor for woman who is ironically treated. The roses decorate the linoleum floor that Sally will have to scrub. This is an image of her future. The image of the final line, the “ceiling smooth as wedding cake”, resonates through the story in an ironical twist, a wedding picture of despair. Such images as “tortilla star” and “linoleum roses” are the type of imagery that perhaps only a woman could create, because they are derived from a woman’s perception of reality; that is to say, this imagery is not biologically determined but culturally inscribed. A woman’s place may be in the home but it is a patriarchal domain.

In another episode/ vignette, ‘A Smart Cookie’, Esperanza relates her mother’s story: “I could’ve been somebody, you know? My mother says and sighs. She has lived in this city her whole life. She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn’t know which subway train to take to get
downtown‖ (90). Esperanza’s acute awareness of the restrictions and limitations of her mother’s life (she cannot even go downtown alone), despite her obvious talents, strengthens her own resolve to escape the confinement of life on Mango Street: “One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I’ll say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away” (HMS 110).

Esperanza’s formation as a writer and predictions of her eventual move from home and Mango Street are hinted at in two stories related to death. These stories suggest that creativity is not only a means of escape from the confines of Mango Street but also an affirmation of life and rebirth. The first story is ‘Born Bad’ in which Esperanza reads her poetry to her aunt who appears to be dying from polio. The aunt replies: “That’s nice. That’s very good, she said in her tired voice. You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn’t know what she meant” (56).

In ‘The Three Sisters’ three mysterious women appear at the funeral of a neighbour’s child. These seek out Esperanza for special attention and advise her like this: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget what you are” (97). In this paradigm of the fairy godmother, Esperanza receives a wish that she does not understand. It is a mystery to her how she could leave Mango Street and still be Mango Street. She realizes that although she is ethnically a Mexican, culturally she is a Mexican American who rejects the patriarchal
values of both and creates a new concept of womanhood for herself. She is in that liminal state where she acts as a ‘stairwell’ -- to employ Bhabha’s image-- in-between different feminine identities.

Cisneros’s novel can also be read as embodying many of the feminist critiques of fairy tales as put forward by a proliferation of literary critics beginning in the early 1970s. Feminist critiques of fairy tales expose how the tales promote damaging images of women and expose how the tales obscure the social reality of women’s lives after courtship and marriage. Lieberman in his analysis of Andrew Lang’s popular collection of fairy tales, *The Blue Fairy Book*, opines that these tales serve to ‘‘acculturate’’ children to proscribed gender roles by making a ‘‘major contribution in forming the sexual role concept of children, and in suggesting to them the limitations that are imposed by sex upon a person’s chances of success in various endeavors’’ (384). Lieberman argues that for women in these fairy tales, ‘‘success’’ is won through allegiance to following a code of behaviour that is highly rigid and highly dependent on physical beauty and passivity. She states quite plainly that, ‘‘the system of rewards in fairy tales, then, equates these three factors: being beautiful, being chosen, getting rich’’ (387). To a great degree, Esperanza’s journey through Mango Street is not only emblematic of her rejection or inversion of the three-tiered system of rewards that allures and holds hostage many women of Mango Street. Rather, Esperanza creates a new set of guiding life principles for ‘‘success.’’ Her discovery of these alternative ways of being and experiencing the world as a woman serves to position her as a heroine of her own life. Esperanza is a distinctly feminist model of a heroine who locates the vocation of writing
as the fulcrum through which she realizes self-definition, freedom, and independence.

Esperanza’s emergence as a young woman writer is connected to her clear-sighted observations of the lives of the women and girls around her; to her interactions with women who offer advice and the possibilities of more fulfilling life choices; and to her desire to take responsibility for imagining a transformative social reality for herself and her community. In Esperanza’s system, then, success becomes contingent on these three factors: bearing witness to oppression of others and self; seeking guidance and alternative models from other women; and imagining social transformation that promotes self and community empowerment.

In the case of Kingston, even though feminist issues do occur in her works, she is against labeling and does not want to be drawn into any group. In an interview conducted by John Whalen-Bridge (National University of Singapore) which Kingston had with Charles Johnson she makes clear her standpoint against rigid categorizations:

I don't like it when critics label my work, "Asian American" or worse than that, it's "Chinese." You know. "She's written about China." I'm writing America. And when they put this China label on it, it means that they have denied what they have read. And they say "What you have written is not true of us. It's true of you Chinese people and those people over there, but we're all right over here." And this happened especially with feminism, and you know I come out so strong for feminism, and everybody said—and the critics say, "Well, look at the way they
treat women over there in China." No. I am talking about the way we're treating women right here” (Whalen-Bridge 31: 69-93).

Elsewhere she had remarked that she was afraid of seeing her book categorized. Even though these remarks reflect Kingston’s dislike of being categorized into a feminist writer or a Chinese American writer, as her stories were written from a woman’s point of view, sometimes she is associated with feminism. When *The Woman Warrior* was published, it was at the height of the feminist movement. Naturally she was hailed as a feminist writer. In the above mentioned interview she makes it clear that she wanted her book to be read as a book about human beings beyond any of these categorizations.

Originally designed as an interlocking story, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* were supposed to be one book. However, during the writing process, women’s ways of thinking and men’s stories seemed to interfere with each other, especially when the latter’s anti-female attitude devastatingly undermined the former’s feminist point of view as Rabinowitz points out. Due to these concerns, it ended up as two separate volumes: *The Woman Warrior* deals chiefly with a female ancestry and *China Men* traces back primarily a male ancestry from a woman’s point of view. *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* both written in the 1970s, have to be designed to cover the whole range of the Chinese American experience. In both she tries to break rigid gender constraints even to the extent of gender crossing.

The opening story of *The Woman Warrior*, the No Name Woman is a
narrative that silences the voice of the female ancestor and, in doing so, also threatens young Maxine. She learns from an early age that unchecked sexual desire leads to danger for women within the Chinese culture of her parents. Indeed, with the exception of this story told as a warning, “No one ever talked sex, ever” (WW 7). This narrative of sexual trauma shapes her subjectivity. Kingston's nameless aunt becomes pregnant outside marriage during starvation times in China, when “to be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was waste enough” (WW 6) [and] “Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the villagers needed food” (WW 13). When the villagers attack the family home, they sever the connection between the family and the community. The family, in turn, blames the aunt for bringing this violence into their lives. The memory of the event becomes a family story which the family must contain through secrecy or denial. Although the circumstances of her pregnancy remain shrouded in mystery because she had no power to present her own story, the aunt in Kingston's text faces the wrath of the villagers for concealing her condition: “The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (WW 13). The destruction of her family home warns against secrecy, even if disclosure had resulted in punishment as well. The No Name Woman commits suicide soon after childbirth by throwing herself into the community well.

This story which is told with little details colours Maxine’s imagination and she feels that her aunt haunts her day and night. Maxine also suspects that she has inherited a propensity for sexual violation:
I wanted to ask again why the women in our family have a split nail on our left little toe. Whenever we asked our parents about it, they would glance at each other, embarrassed. I think I've heard one of them say, ‘She didn't get away.’ I made up that we are descended from an ancestress who stubbed her toe and fell running from a rapist. I wanted to ask my mother if I had guessed right (WW 198).

The split nail marks her body, making visible the vulnerability she feels beneath her skin. Her parents' whisperings and embarrassed glances only make her more suspicious about her own ability to “get away” from the destiny. To be female is to embody threat and instability: “‘I'm not a bad girl,’ I would scream. ‘I'm not a bad girl. I'm not a bad girl.’ I might as well have said, 'I'm not a girl’” (46). Not only does Maxine's femininity make her vulnerable, but she also receives the message that her existence places the entire community at risk. Her mother advises against disclosing the aunt's story. “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say your father had all brothers because it was as if she had never been born’” (1).

She only hears it once, yet it has a dramatic effect on her: “Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (5).

Feminist inquiry regards recovering narratives, or reclaiming "buried" or marginalized truths by and about women, as its fundamental concern. Literary or artistic
precursors, when left unacknowledged, create what Gilbert and Gubar refer to as an "anxiety of authorship" for female authors (Gilbert et al 291). In *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Trinh T. Minh-ha examines the imperative of each generation to claim the cultural narrative of the female ancestor and suggests that the repetition of the story fulfills both giver and receiver, giving each a sense of "pleasure in the copy" (122). Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* illustrates the female artist's compelling and pleasurable engagement with bearing witness through repetition. Maxine reveals the buried story of the No Name Woman in spite of her mother’s advice against it.

As if no time has passed since the starvation period, the aunt's story remains a threat to family security. The aunt's body in the well acts as a seal. Maxine learns from the story that she must confront the impossibility of being female and remaining whole. The split in the nail, the fracturing of wholeness that marks her body and threatens her security, has implications for the psychic health of her family's women. Maxine describes the outcome of this process: “I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and father so frail that 'aunt' would do my father mysterious harm” (*WW* 15). Insanity seems imminent: “I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would it be at our house? Probably me” (*WW* 189). Maxine suspects that she has been doomed to a life of insanity and interprets the “adventurous people” inside her head as a symptom of mental weakness instead of burgeoning creativity.
Of the five sections comprising the text, the one critics have most frequently discussed is this second story. In it, Maxine recounts one of the childhood tales her mother has repeatedly “talk-storied,” the legend of Fa Mu Lan. The legend traces Fa Mu Lan's training with a mystical elderly couple and her rise as a masterful “female avenger” who disguises herself as a male and leads her army into battle against corrupt enemies. She is able to move easily between exhibiting masculine (though not masculinist) behaviour in front of her troops and privately choosing marriage and motherhood (she secretly marries and gives birth while encamped). After vanquishing her foes and liberating her village from a tyrannical baron, she returns to her family and happily begins her role as a civilian. In contrast to the fairy tale, the Fa Mu Lan myth promotes several feminist themes, including the woman's body as a site of empowerment, the performative nature of gender, and a critique of patriarchy; the narrative also subverts the dominance of Western narratives by representing a Chinese woman as a model of strength and utilizing a Chinese story as a source for racial and gender identification. The story of this warrior woman transcends the inflexible gender divisions which sometimes appear in both The Woman Warrior and China Men. The Woman Warrior deconstructs orthodox notions of the roles of a woman by playing and successfully performing the duties of a warrior hitherto considered a masculine territory. The Warrior Woman shows herself to be capable of gender crossing, donning the conventional roles of men.

Given its compelling subject matter, this narrative greatly influences Maxine's world-view; it introduces Maxine to feminist values: “When we Chinese girls listened to the adults’ talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves.
We could be heroines, swordswomen” (WW 18). Maxine tries to emulate Fa Mu Lan, claiming, “I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (WW 20), and attempts to re-enact the legend by battling a new breed of barons: “From the fairy tales, I've learned exactly who my enemies are. I easily recognize them—business suited in their modern American executive guise” (WW 48). Instead of battling power-hungry tyrants in ancient China, Maxine sees herself pitted against institutionalized racism in contemporary America. Yet as she grows older, the Fa Mu Lan story becomes increasingly disempowering, and Maxine admits that “My American life has been such a disappointment” (WW 45) in contrast to the legend. While the story celebrates a woman's independence and portrays her potential as limitless, the patriarchal values Maxine encounters within her family and community undermine the feminist lessons she has absorbed. She cannot reconcile the tale with the Chinese culture that produced it, noting that sexism is a constituent of language itself: “There is a Chinese word for the female I—which is 'slave.' Break the women with their own tongues” (WW 47)! Marginalized in America because she is Chinese and marginalized by the Chinese community because she is a woman, she becomes increasingly dislocated, claiming, “I could not figure out what was my village” (WW 48). She thus loses her sense of identity because she no longer knows how to fight or whom she is defending. This ambivalent state is acutely felt by Kingston. For her devising a Third Space where these contradictory cultural norms meet is much more difficult than in the case of Cisneros. For within her community she receives conflicting messages concerning the roles of women, that of the Warrior Woman and of a slave, and in America she is treated as the marginalized poor Chinese girl, one who does not reach up to the set standards of ‘American feminine’.
Maxine is bewildered by the fact that the Fa Mu Lan tale fails to resonate with the stories she hears about her family still in China. After the Communist revolution, Maxine's family loses its fortune and her relatives are tortured, executed, or financially ruined. Her uncle is executed for trying to trap birds in a tree for food, which the Communists view as a “selfish” act. Maxine cannot reconcile these new stories with the ones from her childhood: “It is confusing that my family was not the poor to be championed. They were executed like the barons in the stories, when they were not barons” (WW 51). Within the moral framework of the Fa Mu Legend, villains are easily identifiable and receive their due, the heroine emerges victorious, and justice prevails. But Maxine has increasing trouble applying this framework to the complexities of her family's story and to the complexities of American and Chinese societies. She still attempts to configure herself as a new Fa Mu Lan but realizes that the battles she must fight are more extensive, wide ranging, and untenable than any Fa Mu Lan herself faced: “Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia” (WW 49).

At the end of “White Tigers,” Maxine nonetheless makes one important though tenuous connection to Fa Mu Lan through the depiction of their bodies as sites of cultural inscriptions. In the legend, Fa Mu Lan's parents tattoo her back with a list of the injustices the baron has committed. When Maxine (imagining herself as Fa Mu Lan) finally encounters the baron, who thinks she is a man, she dramatically removes her shirt to reveal her tattoos: “‘You’ve done this,’ I said, and ripped off my shirt to show him my back. ‘You are responsible for this.’ When I saw his startled eyes at my breasts, I slashed
him across the face and on the second stroke cut off his head” (WW 44). Fa Mu Lan's body becomes doubly significant as a record of and tool against patriarchal oppression and her tattoos are literal representations of the ways in which dominant culture historically has attempted to control women's bodies. Leigh Gilmore characterizes this scene as one of transformation: “the body as a text of revenge instead becomes the female body that must be avenged,” (182) as Fa Mu Lan sheds her male disguise in order to perform her final, and most important, act of justice. The baron, a metonymic representative of patriarchy, can only react in a sexist and objectifying fashion to her unveiling ("his startled eyes at my breasts"), and his violent demise signifies the end of subjugation both for Fa Mu Lan's village and for women in general.

Again attempting to adapt the legend to her own identity, Maxine claims that as an author, she is a type of woman warrior whose body is similarly inscribed by dominant culture and her battle against it: "What we have in common are the words at our backs . . . And I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that they do not fit on my skin" (WW53). Smith views this final connection as a resolution to the previous incompatibility between Maxine and Fa Mu Lan. She argues that Maxine conquers the confusion the legend has wrought by substituting a pen for a sword: "Kingston manages to shatter the complacencies of cultural myths, problematic heroines, and the illusory autobiographical possibilities they sanction" ('Filiality '1125); in other words, Maxine exorcises Fa Mu Lan's overpowering influence by authoring her own story. Maxine's observation can be read as expressing ambivalence rather than triumph.
The ambiguous ending of the “White Tigers” section implies that Maxine senses that something remains unfinished, unfulfilled. Ann Anlin Cheng insightfully sums up the cause of this irresolution as an illustration of the contradiction and fragmentation that feminist scholars have previously discussed: “the Fa Mu Lan myth is told as much for its negation as for its promise . . . . Instead of . . . fulfillment, the tale of *The Woman Warrior* gives the narrator identification *through* difference, disappointment, and failure” (101). In fact, she is left with ambiguity, contradiction, and ambivalence. *The Woman Warrior* depicts the inadequacy of both Western and Asian narratives to address Asian American identity and the strangely liminal position that Asian Americans are assigned: not-quite-Asian and not-quite-American. Asian American feminist identity is in a continual process of seeking rather than achieving a cohesive one, as is shown by Kingston in this section.

By connecting the young girl's life to that of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston shifts the narrative perspective from a mythical mode focusing upon the woman warrior to that of her mother, Brave Orchid. It is at this point in the text that we see the Chinese American daughter struggling to reconcile the paradoxical versions of femininity and identity with which she is confronted via her mother’s stories and teachings. On the one hand, she is inured to hearing Chinese sayings such as 'Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds’, (WW 46) whilst on the other hand, she listens to her mother ‘*talking*- story' about Fa Mu Lan. On the one hand, she busies herself turning 'American-feminine, or no dates', whilst on the other, she ’went away to college - Berkeley in the sixties- and I studied, and I marched to save the world’. On the one hand, she tells us about the Chinese word for the female ‘*I’- which means ‘slave’, whilst on the other, she imagines her own revenge
upon racism and sexism: “To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists; I'd have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. . . . A descendant of eighty pole fighters, I ought to be able to set out confidently, march straight down our street, get going right now” (WW 49).

She minded that emigrant villagers shook their heads at her and her sister. “One girl – and another girl” (WW 45) they said, and made their parents ashamed to take them out together. She screamed and protested when emigrant villagers said, “There is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls” (WW 45). She fumed inside when her great–uncle refused to take girls out when he did the shopping and bought only for boys, candy and new toys. To show her objection to the discrimination against girls, she refused to cook and when she had to wash dishes, she deliberately broke one or two. When her mother scolded calling her, ‘Bad girl’, it made her gloat rather than cry, for she felt that a bad girl is almost a boy. It frustrated her to see that her mother is not impressed when told that she got straight A’s at school. Now, as a grown up woman she wraps her American successes around her like a shawl and thereby shows that she was worthy of eating the food (52). Another solution she comes up with, from the vantage point of adulthood, is her writing. Textual vengeance becomes the retribution that Kingston chooses to take: “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families’. The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (53).
Kingston is also entrusted with her immigrant mother’s story, a legacy she experiences as both empowering and burdensome. In ‘Shaman’, the third section of the novel, Brave Orchid appears as a model of female strength and accomplishment, and as an admirable survivor in her daughter’s imagination. Her mother who wore silk robes and western shoes with big heels and came back carried in a sedan chair from the To Keung School of Midwifery where she had two years of instruction and Hospital Practice, was reduced to a ‘slum grubby’ (WW 51) existence as an immigrant in America, operating a laundry washing other people’s dirty clothes. As she says, “You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America” (WW 77). Brave Orchid’s life is doubly textualised. The narrator herself pieces together her mother’s history by sifting through the textual fragments that she discovers: Brave Orchid’s medical diploma, graduation photographs and photographs of her father. Although this material is partly supplemented by Brave Orchid’s stories about her life, the narrator is left to imaginatively reconstruct the missing sections of her mother’s life. In fact, all of the narrator’s experiences of China, including mythical narratives, and even her knowledge of her relatives and ancestors in China gleaned from letters to her parents have fired her imagination. Towards the end of the section we find her of having come to terms with the dichotomy of life carved out by this ancestry which is sometimes fabulous but at times unacceptable, and the kind of existence and values she embraces in America. It is in this section she realizes the necessity of carving out a space for herself, an in-between space, a space devoid of the patriarchal norms of both Chinese and American culture. It is only in the fifth section we see her attaining that kind of maturity.
The fourth section, 'At the Western Palace', continues the narrator's exploration of her mother's life, but shifts the focus to America, to the narrator's aunt, Moon Orchid, who comes to stay with her sister. Whereas Brave Orchid is a powerful woman warrior, her sister, Moon Orchid is a weak and fragile woman, with little personality of her own. Whereas her mother appears to be like one of those strong women appreciated by Alice Walker in 'In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens' in which she makes clear her ‘womanist’ philosophy, Moon Orchid appears to be a frail contrast to her mother’s strength of character. By naming her ‘Brave’ Orchid she deliberately raises her to the level of the woman warrior and a role model to be emulated.

The final section, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe', which unites the previous sections and the stories of mother and daughter results in interrogating the problems and paradoxes of the mother-daughter nexus. This is particularly apparent in relation to a speech-silence dichotomy. Kingston has already charted the narrator's ambivalence and occasional hostility towards her mother tongue, as well as her attempts to try to escape it. Frequently the site of a repressive representation of women (who are called 'slaves', 'maggots' and ‘cowbirds’ amongst other derogatory labels in the text), her desire to escape from Chinese as the language of repression and turn to English as the language of individualism runs parallel to her attempt to free herself from what she regards as a stifling maternal influence. At the same time she understands her mother’s contribution towards moulding her personality just as she acknowledges the stamp of Chinese culture on her persona. Neither is she a Euro-centric American nor a true Chinese. But she
assumes the guise of a warrior woman, holding a pen instead of a sword, setting out to redress the wrongs done to her ‘tribe’-women.

This she achieves partially due to her mother and her stories, and also because of the inadequacy she feels at home and in the Chinese community. As Gloria Anzaldúa observes, a by-product of being "pushed out of the tribe," is a heightened artistic perception and a drive to create meaning from the chaos, to express the experience of the borderlands. Gloria Anzaldúa names this phenomenon the ‘Coatlicue’ state, an uncanny place in which the individual must face all the uncertainty of being. “Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland,” Anzaldúa writes, “is what makes poets write and artists create” (73). As Kingston feels the disapproving eyes of her community on her, a kind of transformation from slave to warrior begins with reconstituting herself within the language of a powerful story: “When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. Even if she had to rage across all China, a swordswoman got even with anyone who hurt her family. Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound” (WW 19).

The No Name Woman, constrained within a pedagogy of shame, "gave silent birth" (WW 11), but Maxine rejects this heritage of silent victimhood, preferring to articulate her rebirth as active resistance through her other inheritance, her mother's ability to talk-story. Maxine focuses first on the act of remembering or the performance of story, so she can gain access to the tools that will allow her to transform the content of
the story. By connecting herself to the mythical swordswoman Fa Mu Lan, Maxine authorizes herself to fight the oppression perpetuated through language:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblances so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families,’ The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words--‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too -that they do not fit on my skin (WW 53).

With her statement, “My American life has been such a disappointment” (WW 45), she begins her testimony to challenge the oppression she has encountered within her life as a Chinese-American woman. She names the uncle who calls her maggot, the traditions that fail to celebrate her birth, and the boss who uses racist slurs. In this rebellion, she aligns herself with the Fa Mu Lan of her own creation, and her fantasy helps her form her own narrative. The act of speaking out allows Maxine to move from confession to rebellion when she tells her parents that she will not be sold off to the FOB: “One night when the laundry was so busy that the whole family was eating dinner there, crowded around the little round table, my throat burst open. I stood up, talking and burbling”( WW 201). The moment her “throat bursts open,” Maxine forces the hostile internal witness into the light of day, and the possibilities of language expand to include her own perspective.
As an adult writer, Maxine returns to the story of the No Name Woman: “My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes” (WW 16). This return to the aunt's story years after hearing it in childhood reveals her drive to bring forward the ghosts, to allow them to surface, and to claim their own story within the life of the survivor. Here *The Woman Warrior* documents the development of an artistic perspective informed by a traumatic legacy.

Kingston’s second book *China Men*, a kind of sequel to *The Woman Warrior* is an experimentation with a way to tell the story of a culture of story-tellers, “In my father-book, *China Men*, I used the very techniques that the men developed over a hundred years. They made themselves citizens of this country by telling American versions of their lives” (“Imagined” 563).

The female narrator of *China Men* wants to reclaim her father, whose habitual silence is punctuated with violent curses. She wants to know that her father is not cursing women in general: “What I want from you is for you to tell me that those curses are only common Chinese sayings . . . . I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I’m mistaken. You’ll just have to speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong” (CM 14). On this apologetic note she begins this saga of several generations of China Men of her family who migrated to America, ‘The Gold Mountain’. The would-be immigrants borrowed or forged facsimiles of the papers of China men who had travelled to America before them; they memorized and retold the stories immigration officials would accept. Kingston asserts that the world of *China Men*
is “a non-fiction world because I actually heard people tell its stories with fervor. I feel as if I have direct contact with that non-fiction world's energy source” (Thompson 4). But she acknowledges that she “translat[es] from inside the people she [writes] about” (Kim 92). She borrows myths and adapts Chinese folk legends to create American stories. As Linda Ching Sledge notes: “These are not definitive, 'pure' myths in the textual sense but are consciously contrived literary imitations that may be ironic analogues of western tales or variations of folk tales” (7). In short, Kingston's narrative appropriates the lives of real people, the facts of history, the tales of another culture, and makes them tell the American story she needs to hear. In Kingston's case, claiming authenticity as “real” Americans for the Gold Mountain heroes—for herself and other Chinese-Americans (and by implication for members of other immigrant groups who have remained marginal)—has the corollary effect of rendering her Chinese heritage alien and placing her authenticity as a “real” Chinese person in question. Kingston's work may seem alien to an informed Chinese reader, foreign to many American readers, and false to a male Chinese-American writer because she breaks several boundaries of genre, gender, imagination and history. What she achieves by delving deep into the history of her forefathers is not merely a better perspective of American history but a true picture of her hybridized identity, the in-between space her ‘self’ occupies. She arrives at an understanding not so much of an authentic true self but at the knowledge of the multiplicity of her feminine identity.

As mentioned in the previous chapter there is a collection of myths interlaced with the private histories of Maxine’s forefathers. Just as in the case of The Woman
Warrior (Fa Mu Lan myth) there are instances of gender crossing in China Men. Gender crossing begins in this novel, according to Hsiao- Hung Chang, with the story of Tang Ao whose border crossing from China to the Land of Women leads to a gender crossing from male to female. He is forcibly “feminized” by having his earlobes pierced, his toes bent and feet bound, his beard plucked out and his face painted. This forceful transvestism of sexual and racial double subjugation makes him perfectly ready to serve as the queen’s maid. Through such a deployment of male/female inversion, this beginning chapter “dramatizes the structural identity of gender oppression and racial discrimination” (Li, “China Men” 487). By locating the Women’s Land in North America, Kingston uses this story as a politically charged allegory to address the historically and culturally enforced feminization of Chinese-American manhood due to laws prohibiting early Chinese immigrants’ wives from entering America and anti-miscegenation laws, to the formation of bachelor communities, to the imperialist tradition stereotyping the Orient as a silent and passive feminine Other. Tang Ao’s story thus becomes a combined critique of both the white supremacy over minorities and the patriarchal abuse of women.

The very short mythic interpolation entitled “On Mortality” which recounts the story of Tu Tzu-chun, who was tested by a Taoist immortal, is significant for another kind of gender crossing taking place. He is advised by the Taoist: “All that you'll see and feel will be illusions. No matter what happens, don't speak; don't scream. Remember the saying 'Hide your broken arms in your sleeves’” (CM 120). Tu suffers a series of agonizing tortures, some performed on him and some on others, without a word. Still in
the world of illusion, he is killed, judged, and condemned to be born again as a deaf-mute woman. In this incarnation, Tu is threatened by an impatient husband:

You're just being stubborn,” he said, and lifted their child by the feet. “Talk or I'll dash its head against the rocks.” The poor mother held her hand to her mouth. Lu swung the child, broke its head against the wall. Tu shouted out, “Oh! Oh!”—and he was back with the Taoist . . . . Now that Tu had broken his silence . . . no immortality for the human race. “You overcame joy and sorrow, anger, fear, and evil desire, but not love,” said the Taoist, and went on his way (CM 121).

The ending of the story is particularly powerful—it is after Tu has been reborn as a woman that he faces the most painful test. The mother, who is physically incapable of speech, must speak if she is to save her child. Love causes her to cry out even though it is all an illusion, even though Tu has already resisted every other compelling emotion, even though the cry is too late. And even though it costs the human race its only chance of immortality; we know that the mother's cry is the only response possible. Kingston is against rigid gender categorizations. She believes that strictly assigned gender roles can be reversed. The myth of Tu throws light on her belief in the possibility of the exchange of gender roles.

In many of the chapters of China Men, it is the women who speak or prompt speech and the men who remain silent. The thematic threads which bind the various seg-
ments of the book together have in common the issue of appropriation. Typically men appropriate by marking the land, by building and planting; women appropriate by means of language, by naming and telling stories. The two themes come together most clearly in the chapter entitled “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains,” which focuses on the great grandfather in whom there is a mixing of these two roles that of a builder and a teller of stories. Like each of the other major chapters, this one begins with the female first-person narrator recounting what seems to be autobiography, then ranging into the past. It is difficult at first to connect the short fragments which open the chapter with the bulk of the great grandfather's story; at first glance they have nothing in common except a setting in Hawaii. But the question of silence and speech emerges from the sketches which open the chapter in ways that establish a context for the central narrative.

In the first section, the narrator tells about sending money for a bicycle to a "black" cousin in China, the grandson of a Hawaiian woman who had returned to China with her sojourner husband. To return with a "Sandalwood Mountain wife" was unusual: “The king and queen of the Sandalwood Mountains had ruled that a China Man who married a Hawaiian would be called Hawaiian, and many another Pake godfather stayed” (C M 118).

Even after three generations, the “black” cousin and uncle are still marked as outsiders. The money sent to the cousin prompts an angry letter from the uncle, who wants a bicycle of his own. The narrator doesn't send any more money, but comments: “I am glad to see that the black grandmother ended up with a son and a grandson who
are articulate. When she came to China she jabbered like a monkey, but no one answered her. Who knows what she was saying anyway? She fell mute” (CM 86).

From the Chinese point of view, the Hawaiian woman—transported to an alien country where no one understood her language—jabbered like a monkey. Eventually she fell silent. But the narrator (in spite of the uncle's blustering attempt to intimidate her, in spite of the gap in circumstances and sensibilities between the Chinese on the other side of the world and the Chinese-Americans) notes approvingly that the Hawaiian woman's son and grandson are articulate, their articulateness being an evidence of their ability to make demands. The story reverses the historical patterns of immigration in most Chinese-American families; overall, relatively few Chinese workers in America took wives back to China, and workers in Hawaii who married Hawaiian women generally remained there. The point is that any immigrant, exiled in a foreign land, is effectively silenced. The newcomer may “jabber” but no one hears, and the risk is that he or she will give up and fall silent. A willingness to make demands, even unreasonable ones, is better than abject silence. Maxine breaks her cocoon of silence due to this. She wants to be heard by all Americans not merely the Chinese.

The gender crossing motif on the thematic level in both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* can both be extended to the narrative level. In the first book, “the female author-narrator becomes a “word warrior” (Goellnicht 129) or a “writer warrior” (Quinby 310), by becoming involved in the act of writing, which is traditionally gendered as masculine. In the case of Kingston and Cisneros transgression of gender boundaries take
place. They break several rules set by their ethnic communities especially the one concerning the family secrets as shown in *Caramelo* and *The Woman Warrior*, and by taking up writing as their professions the protagonists in the selected four novels ignore gender expectations of the dominant America, writing being considered a masculine activity.