Chapter 5

Conclusion

…the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a space where you are not in this or that but where you are changing. You haven’t got into the new identity yet and haven’t left the old identity behind either—you are in a kind of transition.

(Gloria Anzaldúa)

Ethnic American writing (and identities) often reflects a “borderlands” reality, or what Gloria Anzaldua calls “a constant state of transition. Contemporary American writers from ethnically identified groups (e.g., Native American, African American, US Latino/a, and Asian American) present a diverse view of the constructions of male and female identities in 20th century ethnic American literature. The issue of race and ethnicity, as well as this fluid sense of identity shape and complicate the depictions of men and women as mothers, fathers, siblings, friends and lovers in this literature. These authors often sustain, subvert, or dismantle the dominant American stories or their ethnic cultural myths that often define man and woman in rigid and oppositional terms. These writers deal with issues which affect different ethnic groups in America -- assimilation versus the struggle to retain one’s cultural heritage, and the complex interplay of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Ethnic American writers contest the central paradigms that have dominated American literature and also expand notions of American identity. They address issues of race, ethnicity, class and gender in their struggle to arrive at a viable sense of identity.
Realization of the futility of confining the ‘self’ within boundaries defined by certain cultural and gender norms has resulted in an effective resistance towards generic conventions in the works of Kingston and Cisneros. These two ethnic American writers critically negotiate in their literary texts the impact of ‘straddling two cultures’, specifically when reversing binary oppositions for the purpose of self-empowerment. Issues related to concepts like gender, culture and genre are analysed to discover the hybridized nature of their identity. They do not believe in a monolithic subjectivity or selfhood. In this thesis the focus has been on showing how boundaries divide their ethnic culture and dominant American culture; gender roles assigned by Chinese and Chicano traditions, and Eurocentric American tradition; and genres like novel, short story, poetry, autobiography, etc. are dismantled to create a new sense of selfhood/identity. These boundaries or borders do not deter Kingston and Cisneros from creating a new kind of self. Essentialist identities confined within totalizing boundaries of culture, gender and genre are erased to accept the fluidity of identity. Rather these boundaries act as in-between spaces where hybridized identities are evolved. Their works exemplify how American and ethnic literary forms can be combined. They make use of oral forms like poetry, drama and talk-story. In addition to this emphasis on speech, ethnic American texts highlighted the importance of listening for the purposes of self-understanding. They listen to their ancestors and to others with whom they are connected in multiple ways via myths, talk-storying, writing and dreams. They are committed to resisting silence, questioning stereotypes and revising history and genres.
The development of a distinctive voice is narrated by Kingston and Cisneros in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, *China Men*, *The House on Mango street* and *Caramelo*. How they liberate themselves from traditional patriarchal values without denying their ethnic heritage and also from the male domination of American culture are told in unique ways by these writers. Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘third space’ and his objection to unitary, homogeneous and narrow assumptions of identity has been used in this thesis to understand the female protagonists of these fictional autobiographies as these are narratives expressing the ambivalence, ambiguity and contradiction they experience in association with irreconcilable concepts of femininity they gather from diverse cultures. As these narratives proceed, Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros manipulate the gender roles imposed upon them by their ethnic cultures and the Euro-centric American culture is gradually unravelled. Different, at times, conflicting messages imparted to them by these dichotomous cultures instead of having a debilitating effect on their personalities make them strong women who could act as role models not only to women sharing their ethnicity but to all women experiencing the same dilemma. These two writers succeed in locating the vocation of writing as the fulcrum for self-definition and social change. They are torn between paradoxical versions of feminine identity. They have difficulties in understanding their ethnic culture but they are aware that they do not belong entirely to American culture. They appear to be acting as translators or mediators between cultures who transcend the imposed gender constraints of Chinese, Mexican and American patriarchy. They are in a continual process of seeking rather than achieving a cohesive identity. Instead of accepting a hyphenated existence like that of a Chinese-American/ Mexican-American, Cisneros and Kingston believe in being addressed as Mexican American (Chicano)/ Chinese American,
making the words Mexican and Chinese act as adjectives, stressing the importance of their American identity while at the same time not denying their ethnic roots.

The four novels selected are replete with textual representations of the development of the female protagonists as women, as representatives of the nations and/or cultures which they had inherited as daughters to immigrants, and, significantly, as artists. Intrinsic to the evolution of the bicultural female protagonist are her family relationships, the examples set for her by her female peers and older role models, her struggles to understand and liberate herself from gender-based norms, and her efforts to create a realm where imposed values can survive with an acceptable female identity.

In Cisneros’ *Caramelo* she demonstrates how the traditional gender role assigned by Chicano culture has got a strong hold on generations of women. Traditional Mexican cultural norms demand that women be submissive, silent, selfless mothers who try to live up to the image of la Virgen de Guadalupe (Virgin Mary) all their life, otherwise suffer to be addressed as hociconas”, repelona, chismosa(a big mouth, a woman who questions, carry tales, etc.) and treated as a whore (la Malinche). Women are expected to live by traditional marianista ideals. Should they step outside these boundaries, they would be culturally ostracized. Ironically, they become overly authoritative within the domestic sphere, in which they are culturally allowed to take control as exemplified by the Awful Grandmother, Zoila and others. The ambivalence of female roles in Chicano culture is quite confusing to the growing up Celaya for it gives her mixed messages. She does not know whether to be submissive or strong, conforming or rebellious. Over and above that
is her desire to be like the women in USA who have entered the public sphere. She succeeds in stepping out of the traditional gender roles by writing this historical family narrative, thus entering the public sphere. But she is fully conscious of the hybridized condition of her identity for, even though she assumes the role of the narrator in spite of strict injunctions against it by her father and enters the public sphere just as any other twentieth century American woman, paradoxically it is her culture and family that shapes her narrative ability. By delving into her family’s stories, she acknowledges her strong ties with her family and culture. Her choice to speak out using the family as her subject despite express orders against it, allows her to assert her voice without separating herself from the familial bonds that are part of her ‘self’. She asserts her independence throwing to the winds many a Mexican convention but her stories are rooted in her ethnic culture. She crosses boundaries of cultural silence imposed upon her by speaking out, at the same time does not deny her culture. Unlike the other women Celaya rises above conventional ethnic roles and inherited biases. She transgresses the bounds of imposed silence, yet manages to declare her allegiance to her ethnicity. She occupies the interstitial space between fixed identifications which opens up the possibility of a hybridized female identity neither confined only to her ethnicity nor becoming, what Kingston calls, ‘American feminine’. She does not indulge in, what Bhabha terms as ‘mimicry’, merely imitating the dominant image of a Eurocentric white woman. In her case a new hybrid identity emerges by interweaving elements from her ethnic background and American concept of a woman.
If *Caramelo* concentrates on the family saga of its protagonist Celaya, Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* tells poignant stories of a number of women living in Mango Street. From these women, the child-heroine, Esperanza gathers different versions of femininity and womanhood. Esperanza, as her name suggests, is indeed, a figure of hope. In her efforts to find a viable self/identity she succeeds due to her 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 refusal to embrace 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 Mexican American. 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. The whole story is threaded through with Esperanza’s longing to possess a dream home. Her feverish desire for her own, big, self-styled house is a significant indication of the need to break the cycle of female domesticity and to occupy space all her own, one defined by her own loneliness, creativity, and desires, echoing Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*.

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. The two archetypes which derive from two mythological figures in Chicano/a culture, la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe are embodied by certain
women figures in the story, but they are shown to be so due to certain domestic problems, circumstances beyond their control and thereby disrupting the virgen/puta dichotomy.

When Esperanza is told at the end of the novel that she would always be Mango Street, 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.

_The Woman Warrior_, a collection of stories of women-- No Name Woman, Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid, Tsai Yen and the writer herself-- narrates different stages in the development of young Maxine who has to come to terms with different versions of femininity imposed upon her by ethnic culture and Euro-centric American culture. The pull of these cultural tenets into different directions prove to be too much for her at first. Abandoning her ethnic roots she tries to turn herself into ‘American feminine’ but realizes the futility of it as Esperanza does in _The House on Mango Street_. As Mango Street is always with Esperanza, Maxine’s ethnicity is embedded within her. Yet this ethnicity is modified in the American background just as she changes the Chinese myths when told from the American background. Authenticity is ignored to suit the new environment.
The Woman Warrior is hailed by critics as an exemplar of Asian American literature's subversive nature as well as an emblematic feminist Bildungsroman in which “Kingston transforms her victim's state of cut frenum into a victor's state of full-throated song” (Ling 130) in her attempt to “find a uniquely Chinese American voice to serve as a weapon for her life” (Kim 207). Feminist critics have revised traditional autobiographical studies by refusing to privilege a poetics of “truth” that centres around an autonomous autobiographical “1,” instead emphasizing selfhood as a communal and cultural process. Thus, rather than obscuring or embellishing the autobiography's truthfulness The Woman Warrior's distinct blend of fact and fiction reveals the number of cultural narratives which jostle in young Maxine’s mind. It is hardly surprising, then, that The Woman Warrior resides as a particular favourite among feminist scholars. Feminists interpret The Woman Warrior as a subversive text for disrupting dominant ideologies regarding race, gender and nation. Kingston in her first two novels The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts, and China Men, both published in 1970s tries to break rigid gender constraints and goes even to the extent of indulging in gender crossing.

Kingston attempts to define herself using the stories she has heard as a child but fails partially in doing so, when she fantasies herself as the famed military heroine Fa Mu Lan which causes tremendous psychic grief when she realizes that she is incapable of voicing and defending herself either within her own familial household or in society at large. Maxine's status as a twentieth century Fa Mu Lan results in tortured relationships with her projected ideals, situating Maxine in the liminal state of almost-but not-quite; Anne Cheng calls this a “double malady,” or “the condition of having to incorporate and
encrypt both an impossible ideal and a denigrated self” (72). In other words, her engagement with her mother’s talk-stories compels her to identify with the mythical heroine and simultaneously denies her the possibility of complete identification.

Just as in the case of Cisneros, Kingston too appears to be oscillating between two worlds and two concepts of femininity. Neither has she turned ‘American feminine’ nor has she become the Woman Warrior. Of course, emulating the Woman Warrior she fights with a pen, but in her you cannot find the complacency the Warrior woman’s story portrays towards the end, that of a submissive wife and daughter-in-law. The fairy tale conclusion of the Warrior Woman’s story is not to be expected from the life history of Kingston. Instead of reaching an understanding of an authentic self, the goal with which she began her story, she learns about her hybridized feminine identity towards the end of the novel.

In *China Men*, men’s story is presented by a female writer. She becomes a kind of spokeswoman who speaks of her fellow men’s disappointments and desires. As a “feminist narrator journeys to the Land of Men” (*Personal Statement* 23), Kingston can feel, in writing *China Men*, her transformation into “the kind of woman who loves men and who can tell their stories”. This narrative strategy of telling a male story from a female point of view can, not only destabilize the gendered nature of male-centred history, but also take over the patriarchal power of writing to subvert gender domination. This thematic-narrative double gender crossing is best explained in Leslie W. Rabine’s comment: “*China Men*, about men who have been forced to cross over into the feminine
gender, is written by a woman, who, in the act of writing, has also, like the woman warrior, crossed over, albeit voluntarily, into the masculine gender and assumed the voice of the men she writes about” (480).

Therefore, Kingston’s efforts at drawing and redrawing the gender line seem to foreground not only the gender boundaries between *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* but also those boundaries within each book, as pointed out by Chang. At the same time, the lines drawn between and within these books are steadily crossed over by both transvestite figures and transvestite narrative strategies.

Gender crossing that takes place in Kingston’s first two books receives its full development in her third book, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. Her insistence on blurring the boundaries of gender divisions shows her dislike of rigid categorizations. She confirms Bhabha’s proposal that nationalities, ethnicities and identities are dialogic, indeterminate and characterized by ‘hybridity’ through these stories. The identity of a woman need not be confined to rigid patterns set by ethnic minorities nor do Cisneros and Kingston approve of the domineering patriarchal ideology of Euro-centric American culture. She can oscillate between two worlds, cross over to a domain considered masculine and she shows through her stories how men are welcome to try the attires of females. Cross dressing is welcomed by these two ethnic writers.

Being part of a dichotomy of cultures – ethnic and dominant American cultures--has impelled Kingston and Cisneros to articulate and negotiate culturally hybrid social
identities. Kingston draws memorable and subtle pictures of the harsh realities and cultural conflicts confronted by Americans of Chinese origins in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and *China Men*. She has reconstructed various narratives of experiences in China against the background of American society and within the context of American culture. These China narratives emerge in the ‘other’ cultural context informed by a complex process of translation, translocation, and transfiguration of the original experiences in China. In fact, these narratives of recollection are told to the narrator after they have lost their reference and importance to China. Hence they are related more to the present American context than to their original context in Chinese society. They acquire a different meaning and assume a different role in the American context when reconfigured within it. In Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and *China Men*, the daughter’s experience of China as a semiotic space is structured in a polarized position between her mother’s complicated talk-stories on the one hand and her father’s impenetrable silence on the other. That intertextual relationship between presence and absence determines the semiotic function of China narrative for Kingston. She has to decode her father’s silence and her mother’s speech, a process involving more than simply attempting to locate her mother in *The Woman Warrior* or seeking her father in *China Men*. In both novels, Kingston finds herself by negotiating her relation to her parents, to a semiotically defined identity. Her ‘self’ appears as the accumulation of provisional constructions, which cautiously enter into an open dialogue by which the writer constantly arrives anew. She creates a form of personal Third Space which suggests plurality. Towards the end of the novel *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator acknowledges the open nature of her identity—consisting of the interaction between her past and her present—and, consequently, of her
writing. Although she sees constant change, she perceives it as a sequential development rather than as an accumulation of simultaneous phenomena. She arrives at a new understanding of herself, which is based on her fragmented identity. She perceives herself as a hybrid individual and tries to define the fragmented nature of her identity in different terms.

The pull of different cultures opens a potential Third Space for Maxine; yet, although she is constantly learning and changing, she recognizes it as such only towards the end of *The Woman Warrior*. The story with which Kingston ends *The Woman Warrior* is a model for the process of appropriation, which becomes both theme and method in *China Men*. At the core of the book (which, like *The Woman Warrior*, is a mix of autobiography, fiction, history, and myth) is the effort at reclamation that takes place on two levels, the individual and the social. Her way of returning meaning to her lost identity is closely linked to the re-interpretation of her Chinese culture which she imported into an initially foreign environment and which she tries to trace back via its Chinese influences in *China Men*.

*China Men*, a saga of the Chinese American pioneers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involves not only self-creation but also ‘self-justification’. She demands an acknowledgement of the role of her ancestors in shaping America, their role as founding fathers. By telling their stories through imaginative reconstruction, she claims America for her Chinese American countrymen who are descendants of the men who planted sugar cane after clearing rainforests and built roads and railway tracks by
blasting mountains. By 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, she creates in-between spaces for them in America.

As in the case of *The Woman Warrior*, so in *China Men* she borrows Chinese myths and folk legends to create American stories. In fact she appropriates the lives of real people, the facts of history and myths to tell her story just as the early immigrants (Bak Goong and others) appropriated the land, making it so completely their own that the land itself tells their story. The land has imbibed their spirit, which in a way make it imperative for Americans to accept the early Chinese immigrants as their forefathers. By rewriting history and myths Kingston refuses to accept the cultural identity designed by others. She reiterates the role played by Chinese immigrants in building America, thus claiming America for them. Life in America has changed their identity. They are neither authentically Chinese nor typical Americans. Kingston’s exploration of the lives of her ancestors helps her in her quest for a true knowledge of herself. Her ‘self’ dangles between these alien cultures, American and Chinese, occupying a Third Space.

Home, a cultural obsession in America finds poignant expression in Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*. Part of the process of ethnic American self-definition has always been the definition of its space. Owning a house is an important measure of cultural enfranchisement. The objective of home ownership signifies a sense of belongingness as well as owning a corner in the world. Esperanza’s passionate
preoccupation to have a house of her own reflects a yearning to belong. The house on Mango Street which represents her Chicano roots from which she moves away only to return to it again and again shows the cultural space she occupies. She moves away from her ethnic roots to embrace a multicultural space but she knows that Mango Street would never leave her; it is close to her heart. She is culturally located in the interstices between two cultures, not at home in either, necessitating the creation of a third space where she tries to make sense of her cultural identity.

In ‘Caramelo’ the protagonist Celaya tries to bring out her Mexican American family’s difference from traditional Mexican culture and the main stream culture mainly through a linguistic analysis of Mexican culture and also by her exploration of the stories of her grandparents, parents and close relatives. The regular journeys undertaken by her immediate and extended family from America to Mexico and vice versa represents the liminal interstitial space occupied by Celaya and her family. The grandmother, almost a symbolic figure of tradition, represents Mexican culture that sometimes is in conflict with the dominant culture of the United States. Celaya’s love and hate relationship with her grandmother demonstrates the kind of ambivalent space she occupies between Mexican cultural traditions and that of American cultural traditions. Her literal translation of Spanish words and expressions and other linguistic experiments illustrate in another way her attempt to define her identity.

The four texts of Kingston and Cisneros, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, *China Men*, *The House on Mango Street* and *Caramelo* are
autobiographical, semi-fictitious accounts of their development as writers in a culture that is familiar as well as foreign. In these texts, they create dialogues between their cultural heritage and their new environment as a means of self-exploration. Both Cisneros and Kingston trace their roots in these novels in order to be able to find their positions in their new cultures. This self-encounter is determined by self-analysis and self-interpretation that tend to result in the recognition and creative realization of the different cultural influences that shape the self in space- a possible Third Space between faraway homes and the present home. The possibility and creation of a Third Space is dependent upon the writers’ self-awareness related to their position in their surroundings. This self-awareness leads them towards the condition of cultural identity in transition.

Kingston’s and Cisneros’ recognition of the difficulty of binding their cultural and gender identities by an inflexible set of norms have, as it is explained in chapter IV, led them to experiment with new methods of narration. These writers’ experimentation with technique have made them create new genres, mixing conventional literary forms like autobiography, novel, poetry, memoir, short story, and also history. To the question whether The House on Mango Street is autobiographical Cisneros has given the answer, “All fiction is non-fiction. Every piece of fiction is based on something that really happened. On the other hand, it’s not autobiography because my family would be the first one to confess: “Well it didn’t happen that way” (Pilar E. Rodriguez Aranda 148). They always contradict my stories. They don’t understand I’m not writing autobiography”. Using the autobiographical form to create identity, these writers break down the
hegemony of formal ‘autobiography’ and break out of the silence that has bound them culturally to discover a resonant voice of their own.

The crisis of identity experienced by these ethnic writers and the resultant confusion and the ambivalent state of their condition is clearly mirrored through these novels. They have experimented with literary forms extensively, pushing boundaries of novel-writing in order to create a viable Third Space where their multicultural and multilayered identities go on evolving into something new. This experimentation is carried further in their subsequent works. Post modern writers, in general, display this aptitude for trying new forms of writing; still the contribution made by both Kingston and Cisneros is no less significant. We can say that both Kingston and Cisneros have succeeded in bringing out through these experimentations the dilemma and confusion, involved in constructing an identity which is true to their ethnic background and American culture. Their significant works profoundly challenge our conception about identity/self. With a central focus on the notion of hybridized nature of identity, the difficulty of defining the boundaries of the self as these boundaries have the tendency to overlap constantly is demonstrated by Kingston and Cisneros. What we are reminded here, are the last lines from Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem, “To live in the Borderlands means you”: “To survive the Borderlands/ you must live sin fronteras / be a crossroads” (217). In order to survive these boundaries or borders they have learned to be sin fronteras (without borders) that is, to exist without borders.

The purpose of the thesis is to show how Kingston and Cisneros destroyed the barriers set up by their ethnic cultures and Euro-centric American culture in order to
create spaces whereby they could emerge as wholesome individuals, fully accepting the ambivalent state they dwell in. Attempt has been made to stress how they come out as powerful women writers after sifting through, and imbibing disparate experiences. They teach the world through their writings that the individual cannot compartmentalize his/her self and exist in a vacuum untainted by different cultures, movements or by powerful men and women. It is essential that we understand the composite nature of our personalities, or else ideas like ethnic purity, authenticity, etc. would lead to the kind of ethnic cleansing carried out by Hitler. By addressing these issues again and again Kingston and Cisneros stress their significance in the present scenario. It is imperative that such efforts to make the world a better place should be acknowledged, and research in related areas should be continued.

Kingston and Cisneros are giving voice to what it meant to be a hybrid, a mixture, a *mestiza*. The feeling of being aliens in their ethnic culture and dominant culture, the sense of being caught between interstices, spaces between the different worlds they inhabit, is acutely felt by both of them as is evident from their works. They manage to confirm this painful sense of marginality, at the same time provide alternative ways of tackling these issues. They offer viable models to emulate for those who are caught in the state of being betwixt and between, of belonging to at least two identities at the same time. Due to their deep understanding of boundaries or border lands and hybridity, these writers teach America, a land of immigrants, how to be American. They teach how to be a new kind of human being who is capable of dealing with the confusions and contradictions of existence in boundaries, which in a larger sense is the state of every
human being alive today, not just the immigrants and minorities but all and sundry due to globalization which takes the immigrant experience beyond borders and holds the collision of cultures a reality everywhere because “we are all living in a society where these borders are transgressed constantly” (Anzaldúa 233).
Chicana (female) and Chicano (male). Chicano/as are people residing in the United States who trace their ancestry to Mexico.

Ethnicity refers to the character or quality of a particular cultural group.

Aztec- an Indian tribe

Aztlán- Chicano/as consider, the land of Aztecs to be their homeland.

*mestizaje*- mixed race

The myth of Aztlán - The Spanish, Indian and *mestizo* ancestors of Chicanos from Mexico explored and settled in parts of the U.S. southwest as early as the 16th century. Some of these early settlers in the U.S. had to go back to Mexico either with later invaders or with missionaries. For the Indians, this constituted a return to the place of origin, Aztlán. Going back to this Edenic land of origin constitutes the myth of Aztlán.

*marianista* – a woman living as per the traditional feminine ideals in Latino cultures

*machista* -- a man living as per the traditional masculine ideals in Latino cultures

*marianismo* - a conglomerate of traditional feminine ideals in Latino cultures

Coatlicue—According to Anzaldúa, a place in which the individual must face all the uncertainty and confusion, an ambivalent state