Ethnic American literature, a significant and growing branch of American literature, is preoccupied with the question of identity/selfhood as ethnic Americans are under the impact of a confluence of cultures. The quest for identity and self-knowledge that ethnic American writers embark on reveal their awareness of the dynamic and ever-changing nature of their hybridized identities. Ethnic American literature focuses on depicting the cultural specificity at the same time hybridity of different ethnic groups of America-Asian, African, Native and Chicano/a. Words like ‘authenticity’ and ‘essentialism’ are to be dispensed with when analyzing the work of an ethnic American writer even though the term ‘ethnicity’ itself assumes narrow conceptions of a pure and authentic self. Ethnic American literature never specifically concentrates on depicting Asian American, African American, Native American or Chicano/a culture as such, but concerns mainly with the hybridity that is inscribed in their very designation.

Ethnic Americans find themselves in an ambivalent state, an in-between condition as they try to come to terms with disparate cultural codes. The post-colonial critic Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity and concepts such as liminality and Third Space are employed to explain the fluid, non-dualistic, ambivalent nature of ‘self’/identity possessed by the female protagonists of Chinese American, Maxine Hong Kingston and Chicana, Sandra Cisneros. Hybridity which represents cultural difference is positioned in-between two contenting cultures. It occupies an in-between space neither rooted in a pure ethnic cultural tradition nor in
the dominant culture. Bhabha defined hybridity as what is ‘new’, which emerges from a Third Space. This is a space intrinsically critical of essentialist positions of identity. Bhabha’s Third Space represents a location/space where new cultural meaning and production occurs, calling into question established categorizations of culture and identity. According to Bhabha, this hybrid Third Space is an ambivalent site (mental and emotional states of perplexity arising from a clash of voices results in an ambivalent state according to Bhabha) where cultural meaning and representation have no unity or fixity. According to Bhabha, liminality/Third Space is the middle state, a stage of transition or a border zone. The pluralistic nature of ethnic Americans’ identity is recognized in the Third space or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “the third element” (102) where it develops a tolerance for contradictions. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is incompatible arises. In this space, barriers set by both cultural traditions are ignored and allowed to form something new.

The present study aims to show how Cisneros and Kingston who are situated in that liminal state/interstitial passage due to their ethnic background and the culturally divergent environment they inhabit, locate themselves or create comfortable zones/spaces for themselves. It examines the method by which Kingston and Cisneros come to terms with the fluid nature of their identity and how they keep on evolving themselves into something new in a Third space. The concepts of gender, culture, and the resistance towards generic conventions are the paradigms chosen, for an in-depth analysis of Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) and *China Men* (1980) and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*
(1984) and Caramelo (2002). Published to wide critical acclaim, the above-mentioned works have caused intense debates about such issues as genre and feminist writing. Recipients of several awards and recognitions these two accomplished writers have attracted a lot of critical attention. Much of it had centred upon their works’ troubling generic status. While the texts selected for analysis deal specifically with two branches of ethnic American literature, namely Chinese American and Chicano/a, major issues addressed and viable solutions offered by these writers can be applied to other branches of ethnic American literature.

The research study is entitled ‘Undefined Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture and Resistance in Selected Works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros’. It is outlined into five chapters and a preface. The first chapter is divided into two parts. The first section deals with major preoccupations of ethnic American literature and relevance of the theory of multiculturalism. The history and major issues of two specific branches of ethnic American literature, Asian American literature and Chicano/a literature to which the selected writers belong, are discussed in order to position them in the right perspective. The second section analyses how relevant Bhabha’s theory of the Hybridized ‘Self’ in the Third Space to an analysis of the texts under consideration.

The second chapter analyses how the rigid gender categorizations prevailing in the ethnic cultures and the Euro-centric American culture are subverted by Kingston and Cisneros in order to form viable female selves. The third chapter discusses how
inter- and intracultural influences confuse them before they grow into a consciousness of their hybridized identities. Chapter four of the thesis examines the distinctive narrative strategies employed by Kingston and Cisneros which reflect the ambivalent state of their identity. The last chapter attempts a summary of the observations and concludes the thesis.

Kingston and Cisneros violate the boundaries set up by their ethnic cultures and Euro-centric American culture in order to create spaces whereby they evolve into powerful women writers after sifting through, and imbibing disparate experiences.