Chapter 3

REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: MAXINE HONG KINGSTON AND AMY TAN
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The issue of Chinese immigration to the USA and the related question of acculturation figure prominently in the literary works of Chinese American writers. Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan have specifically foregrounded the issues. They view the issues mainly from the gender perspective because immigration to America brings them to a new environment where the repressive socio-cultural norms of their country of origin do not apply and they feel a new exhilaration of liberty in the acculturation process. Both the authors go back to history, imaginatively reconstruct it and try to demonstrate how this past appears in the present experience of the members of the new generation in the late twentieth century America.

We shall discuss in this chapter two 'fictional autobiographical' works by Maxine Hong Kingston – The Woman Warrior (1976) and China Men (1980) – and two fictional works by Amy Tan – The Joy Luck Club (1989) and Kitchen God's Wife (1991). Kingston's first book, winner of National Book Critics Circle award in 1976, draws freely from the 'heroic' tradition of Chinese women. China Men, winner of National Book Award in 1980, has a grand sweep, embracing as it does the entire range of the history of Chinese immigration to the USA, seen through the lenses of her own family history. Both the works of Kingston cannot be placed in a single generic category. These are an innovative mix of biography, autobiography, fiction, history, talk-stories, myths and legends – a literary experiment that arose
out of an Asian American woman author's response to her ancestral memory of immigration experience in the USA.

Amy Tan's two novels – The Joy Luck Club (1989) and Kitchen God's Wife (1991) – are based on some Chinese women characters' experience of migration to America. The stories are set against the background of Japanese invasion of China that plunged the country into chaos and made people flee for refuge. But the focus is mainly on individual characters. The shadows of patriarchy loom large in the women characters' memory and haunt them even after they escape to the USA. These books which stress family values were immensely popular in America. Joy Luck Club, for example, was reported to have sold 4.5 million copies by 1996 and was the finalist for both the National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle award. From the immigrant space in the USA the stories move backward in time to China, and then return to the USA to explore their physical and psychical status.

All these works, as already mentioned, are woven around historical materials or are set against specific historical situation. The knowledge of history is necessary for understanding the time and places against which the stories are set. It is more so for the white American readers of the books. Maxine Hong Kingston observes in an interview that the mainstream Americans are on the whole ignorant of the historical perspective of Chinese immigration to America:

When I write I feel that I need to write our history. I write about the history of the Chinese that first came to this country and then I follow the roots way back to the mythic beginnings. We Asians remember our ancestors and bring them into our lives through story, and we connect ourselves and our readers to history. But history in these books, have been seen through women's eyes. The speakers and protagonists are mainly women characters, and even when major male characters...
appear, they are seen from the perspective of the Chinese American female speakers, usually a child or a young woman. It is the women’s views of history, and of issues like patriarchy, mother-daughter relationship, inter-racial relationship, their dilemma about their own identity that assume importance in the books. Maxine Hong Kingston reversed her original plan of writing the stories of Chinese American men and women in a single volume because the men’s stories were incompatible with the women’s stories. In an interview she observed, “The mythology is so different - the men’s stories were in conflict with the women’s stories.”3 The ‘men’s book’ was to be a companion volume. In another interview with Paula Rabinowitz, Kingston explains the reason for this separation:

The women had their own time and place and their lives were coherent; there was a woman’s way of thinking. My men’s stories seemed to interfere. They were weakening the feminist point of view. So I took all the men’s stories out, and then I had The Woman Warrior.4

The separation of the narratives on the basis of gender gave them a focus which otherwise would not have been possible. For this Kingston had to take certain decisions on presentation. She tells Rabinowitz that since the women characters in The Woman Warrior draw on Chinese mythology for their strength, “the myth becomes part of the women’s lives and the structure of the stories.”6 Myths, legends and fables enter freely into characters and become inseparable from their lives. They lend the book a dreamy quality. In China Men, on the contrary, they are separate narratives. Myths and present-day stories alternate here. In the book’s table of contents mythical chapters are printed in italics to signify their separateness. Kingston argues that the male characters, who were making history and a new myth in the new country, did not know whether their old myths would give them any
strength or not. As she says, “They were not so caught up in the old myths as the women were.”

In view of the emphasis on gender-specific experience, it seems logical to discuss the issue of immigration under two separate sections. In the first section, we shall discuss the Chinese immigration experience in general, while in the other section, we shall discuss the gender issues that crop up from the experience of immigration.

3.1 IMMIGRATION PERSPECTIVES

At the outset, it should be mentioned that there is some ambiguity in the identity of the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston’s works *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. In both the works, the narrator is a young Chinese American girl, and it naturally raises the question whether the narrator and the author are one and the same person. The books are officially placed under the category of biography and history, and there are points of similarities between the narrator and the author. The narrator lived in Stockton, California, and so did Maxine Hong Kingston, the author. In an interview with Susan Brownmiller, Kingston refers to her own mother as “Brave Orchid”, the same name the narrator’s mother has in *The Woman Warrior*. In *China Men*, the mother is mentioned simply as ‘mother’ or ‘MaMa’. But there are fictional elements which dilute the autobiographical status of the books. The identification, however, is not strictly essential as the books may be considered as fictional autobiography.

Kingston makes the perspective of a second generation Chinese American girl the focal point in *China Men*. The narrator, who wants to establish herself as an acculturated Chinese American capable of leading her life as a ‘normal’ American
citizen, is confronted with two problems. On the one hand, she finds herself being regulated by the outlandish norms of an immigrant society which is located in modern America. She thinks that she lives with people with shadowy lives, and the 'ghosts' of her ancestors also go on haunting her. She must get away from this unreal world. On the other hand, her identity as a Chinese American provokes racist comments from white Americans who cannot accept the fact that America is a nation of immigrants from different parts of the world, and not necessarily from Europe alone.

The girl narrator must know the history of her family and of her community in order to be clear about her own identity. In *China Men* Kingston deals with her exploration of this history in order to foreground Chinese immigrants’ right to claim America as their own country. The establishment of this claim would help them contest the white Americans’ imposition of foreignness on them.

Kingston uses 'silence' as a useful artistic tool to reveal the extent of oppression that Maxine’s father had undergone. This tool is usually applied to women who are subjugated by patriarchy. But Kingston problematises the concept by making Maxine’s father, a male member of the Chinese immigrant community, totally silent about his past in America.

In fact, Kingston creates parallelism by telling a mythical story of Tang Ao, a Chinese sojourner, who was caught and feminised in North America. The complexity of Kingston’s narrative style is understood by the fact that the story is also intended as an ironic comment on Chinese males who retained all the social power and imposed restrictions on their women in China. Femininity is used as a
symbol of a degraded and humiliating social condition. The silence of the narrator's father is indicative of such humiliation.

The narrator who is disturbed by the mysterious silence her father maintains about his past, expresses her anguished reaction to the following effect: "I want to be able to rely on you, who inked each piece of our laundry with the word Center, to find out how we landed in a country where we are eccentric people" (CM 14). She obviously plays on the word 'Center', and seems to assert that the laundry where he worked served as a 'center' for members of the marginalized Chinese American community whose lives gradually took roots in the new country. She stresses the fact that the Chinese immigrants are "eccentric" people in America. The word "eccentric", which has its origin in Greek word ekkentros (from ek 'out of' + kentron 'centre') means, according to Concise Oxford Dictionary, "unconventional and slightly strange"; it also means "not placed centrally or not having its axis placed centrally."7 By designating her own people as 'eccentric' she obviously refers to the marginalized status of the Chinese American people in the socio-economic and political structure of America. One reason for this marginalization was the physical and cultural 'otherness' of Chinese immigrants who appeared 'strange' and 'unconventional' to the white American gaze.

The narrator's digging of her ancestral history is part of her search for roots. While she is engaged in the process, she plays the role of both an insider, participating in the history of her community, and an outsider, observing it critically from outside.

The narrator, as it appears, thinks that her father's silence is pregnant with significance. Keeping mum is synonymous with shutting the past not only from
himself but from his progeny as well. The father must have some reason for this. This is how the narrator thinks about his silence:

You say with few words and silences: No stories. No past. No China. You only look and talk Chinese. There are no photographs of you in Chinese clothes nor against Chinese landscapes. Did you cut your pigtails to show your support for the Republic? Or have you always been American? Do you want to give us a chance at being real Americans by forgetting the Chinese past? (CM 14)

The narrator wonders whether this amnesia is a tragic concession to his progeny so that they, not knowing this past, could be whole-heartedly American and pull away from roots in China. But the narrator on her part is restless to hear of her father’s past. She resolves to reconstruct his past: “I will tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words…” (CM 15). She imaginatively reconstructs her father’s stories. In the process, however, she imagines the stories of three generations of habitual sojourners, many of whom ultimately settled down in America. She is hampered in the task by inadequate materials, and so has to depend mainly on oral history in the form of ‘talk stories’ heard from her mother and other female relatives.

Elaine Kim rightly points out that the narrator’s father and other male characters are presented “in a gallery of diverse and general possibilities as several archetypal Chinese grandfathers and fathers.” The narrator’s father or grandfather could be any Chinese immigrant father or grandfather. Their stories are open-ended and the reader is provided with several versions. In the book the narrator’s father, for example, has different versions of migrations. He could have entered through Cuba, Angel Island or Ellis Island. She also imagines both legal and illegal ways of his immigration. By doing this she seems to put her materials in the zone of possibilities. She implies that any of the versions is possible.
Kingston’s presentation of multiple versions of an immigrant’s entry into America is a narrative strategy for pointing out the unreliability of her source. But considering the fact that such stories are all plausible and were in circulation among immigrant families, Kingston’s unofficial version of immigration history contests the official versions presented by mainstream America. She obviously wants her readers to remember that historiography functions basically as an institutional practice which excludes all ‘eccentric’ versions. In an essay Edward Said observes that mainstream historians are troubled by the fact that the emergent and immigrant groups in the United Nations have disputed “the official, unitary fable of America” as it is used to be represented by the great classical historians of America. These new groups want the writing of history to reflect an America in which slaves, servants, labourers, and poor immigrants also played “an important but as yet unacknowledged role.” Said further argues that the narratives of such marginalized people, silenced for a long time by the great discourses, disrupt the “unruffled serenity” of the official story. This they do by interrogating the basic assumptions of the official story and projecting the point of view of “lesser peoples” like women, Asian and African Americans, and various other minorities. Such narratives, it may be noted, demonstrate distinct stylistic ‘otherness’. Speaking of ethnic texts like Kingston’s China Men and Zeese Papanikalas’s Buried Unsung, Yiorgos Kalogeras argues that narratives in texts by marginalized writers have oral and folkloric orientations. They are basically fragmentary in nature, and accommodate imagination and interpretation to play a transformative role by deconstructing the old belief in the “didactic and magisterial nature of the documentary.”
Kingston's *China Men* bear out the truth of Said's and Kalogeras's arguments. Kingston's Chinese American narrator has her sources of information in Chinese American oral traditions like "talk stories". By emphasising the talk stories Kingston interrogates the official methodology of history writing that elides minority communities from its purview. The girl narrator's act of imaginative reconstruction establishes the "pioneering" contributions of her ancestors to the making of America in the face of overt racism. By making the narrator do so, Kingston explodes the 'fable' of a unitary America and points out the diverse origins of American people.

Kingston approaches the Chinese immigration history in two ways. She foregrounds the discriminatory, racist treatment meted out to Chinese immigrants. She shows how the mechanism of oppression operated, and how a 'colonial' mentality was at work against the Chinese immigrants. Simultaneously, he focuses on the hard labour the Chinese immigrants put in for the making of America. In this way the author projects her critique of the mainstream historiography and simultaneously emphasises the need for examining the contributions of diverse groups of immigrants.

To provide a picture of how the Chinese immigrants survived in America despite severe anti-Chinese propaganda and legislations, Kingston includes in *China Men* an entire chapter called "The Laws". This chapter details the legislations to restrict or deport Chinese immigrants. Kingston justifies the inclusion as personal and historical necessity:

The mainstream culture doesn't know the history of Chinese-Americans, which has been written and written well. The ignorance makes a tension for me, and in the new book (i.e. *China Men*) I just
couldn’t take it any more. So all of a sudden, right in the middle of the stories, plunk – there is an eight page section of pure history. It starts with the Gold Rush and goes right through the various exclusion acts, year by year. There are no characters in it. It really affects the shape of the book and it might look quite clumsy.11

In the epigraph to this chapter Kingston quotes from Article V of The Burlingham Treaty (1868) in which both the countries (the USA and China) recognised “the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance … for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or as permanent residents” (CM 152). The epigraph serves the purpose of exposing the fact that the human right was extolled theoretically only to be violated in practice in the USA through discriminatory legislations and racist behaviour.

The narrator points out the contradiction in the American attitude. She mentions that in 1868, the year of the signing of the Burlingham Treaty, 40,000 miners of Chinese origin were “Driven Out” (CM 152). In California and San Francisco they received discriminatory treatment, and several state laws (e.g. “police tax” to cover the extra policing their presence required, a queue tax, a “cubic air ordinance,” a pole law prohibiting the use of carrying baskets on poles, a laundry tax) were passed. Although Federal Courts declared some of the state and city laws unconstitutional, the repealed laws were often re-enacted in another form (CM 153-154). The fanatical lobbying from California ultimately culminated in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Since this act has been discussed in the Introduction, we need not go into details here. We, however, need to point out that the policy of exclusion (1882 – 1943) had a severe demoralising effect on the Chinese immigrants in the USA. In 1889 the Supreme Court ruled in Chae Chan Ping vs the United States case that “regardless of the existence of a prior treaty” a race “that will not
assimilate with us" (i.e. white Americans) could be excluded when deemed 
"dangerous to...peace and security. ... It matters not in what form aggression and 
encroachment come, whether from the foreign nation acting in its national character 
or from vast hordes of its people crowding in upon us."\textsuperscript{12} Kingston obviously 
intended to assert that the racial prejudice against the Chinese immigrants was deep-
rooted in the society. The Supreme Court verdict indeed violated the spirit of the 
Burlingham treaty and betrayed the white American’s fear of the ‘yellow peril’.

In 1924 anti-miscegenation laws were passed both by the Congress and some 
state legislatures. In 1906 the San Francisco Board of Education ordered that all 
Chinese, Japanese, and Korean children be segregated in an Oriental School. In 
response to a protest from the Japanese government, President Roosevelt persuaded 
the Board of Education to allow Japanese to attend white school. This is yet another 
proof of inequitable application of laws of immigration. These regulations reduced 
the status of Chinese Americans in the US. In the new geopolitical space they could 
not secure the rights and obligations of citizenship. On the contrary, coercive 
circumstances made them socio-politically powerless. This powerlessness is 
implicitly equated with emasculation.

In the opening chapter called "On Discovery" Kingston symbolically 
describes this emasculation. She narrates how a Chinese ‘sojourner’ named Tang 
Ao, looking for the Gold Mountain, crossed the ocean and arrived at the mythical 
Land of Women. He was captured, his feet bound, his earlobes pierced, his facial 
hairs plucked off, and he was made to serve a meal at the queen’s court.

This mythical story is invested with immense reading possibilities. The Land 
of the Women may be symbolically construed to be a land having bewitching charm.
For a long time it had been casting a spell on the early Chinese sojourners and prospective immigrants who could not help responding to its irresistible call. Despite the nature of treatment they received, they continued to be attracted to it. The mysterious charm of the land is associated with America later in the book where the narrator visited a small land in Hawaii popularly known as "China Man’s Hat". She heard a siren-like song emanating from the island. She felt that “it was the voice of the island singing, the sirens Odysseus heard” (CM 90). It is, she thought, the self-same song that her “American ancestors” (i.e. early Chinese immigrants) must have heard and were enchanted.

The myth of Tang Ao is usually interpreted as a symbol of the Chinese immigrant’s emasculation and loss of power. The China Man, who enjoyed a position of dominance over women, suddenly became a ‘woman’. He was stripped of his power and was silenced. Donald C. Goellnicht observes in an article that the opening chapter acts as a “controlling myth” in the book in the same way as Fa Mulan legend does in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*.13 It serves as a parallel to the way the Chinese immigrants were treated in America and how they survived such treatments. Kingston, according to Goellnicht, both deplores the emasculation of China Men in America and critiques the Confucian patriarchy of traditional family life.14 Kingston, in fact, through this double-edged legend, sees social norms, generally imposed on women, being now imposed on the immigrant men with a change in geo-political situation. In the new land an ethnic community is seen in terms of subjugation in the same way as women are generally seen in a patriarchal society. In this way both a particular ethnic group and a particular gender group are degraded in the socio-cultural hierarchy.
The effect of the feminisation is severe on the psyche of male Chinese immigrants. As long as they are in the family, they are looked after well by their wives and children. Thus their male position and ego are somewhat restored within the family. But outside the family, out in the hostile world, they are forced to assume the female subject position. In the chapter “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains” we find white “demonesses” (i.e. white American women) coming to the docks of San Francisco to recruit jailed China men as servants, cooks and babysitters (CM 150). All these jobs are traditionally assigned to women. They became victims to the same practice they imposed upon their women. The reversal of gender roles was a very traumatic experience for them. It must have been much more so as they were subjugated by women, of course white women. The hierarchy of the Confucian China also went haywire in the Angel Island Immigration Station where the women were locked (on the second floor) above their male counterparts (on the first floor). The men could hear the footsteps of women walking across the ceiling above their heads. This was generally interpreted as bad omen – a “diabolical, inauspicious beginning to be trodden over by women” (CM 55). Anxious comments like “Living under women’s legs”, “Climbed over by women” were made. Even walking under women’s pants on clotheslines was considered to be bad luck. The China men thought that the ‘demons’ (i.e. white American men) had deliberately planned such humiliation at the Angel Island.

Although the narrator’s father was an American citizen, not all the avenues were open to him for a decent living. In China he was a teacher schooled in the Confucian system. But that education was useless in America. His wife’s profession (Shaman), mentioned in The Woman Warrior, also came to nothing in the new
country. But unlike his wife, he (whom the narrator calls BaBa) became depressed. His initial experiments with some jobs, including that of the manager of a gambling house, failed. He went through an acute mental agony and lapsed into silence. Men like BaBa and the ‘real aunt’s’ husband in China Men also grew dumb or insensitive to the happenings around them. They were ill-equipped to cope with the American reality. The narrator’s mother (whom she calls MaMa) had to be firm in such a critical situation. She chided her husband for being inactive and for lacking strength. Her chiding summarises his background:

You piece of liver. You poet. You scholar. What’s the use of a poet and a scholar on the Gold Mountain? You’re so skinny. You’re not supposed to be so skinny in this country. You have to be tough. You lost the New York laundry. You lost the house with the upstairs. You lost the house with the back porch .... No loyal friends or brothers. Savings draining away like time. Can’t speak English. Now you’ve lost the gambling job and the land in China. (CM 248).

The narrator comments that the mother, “being entirely bold herself” (CM 248) cannot understand her father’s shyness or inactivity. She took all kinds of measures to make him physically and mentally strong. She herself worked in the fields and canneries. This boldness to assume total control of the family as an economic and cultural unit speaks highly of first generation Chinese immigrant women’s mental strength and physical stamina, and this serves as a contrast to some of their male counterparts’ weakness.

Kingston’s narrative juxtaposes an objective presentation of the discriminatory legislations with purely imaginative accounts of her forefathers’ adventures in the Gold Mountain. She had to imaginatively reconstruct her ancestors’ history of immigration and their “pioneering” contributions to the making of America. Through this imagining of their contributions, the narrator questions the
hegemonic thrust of the mainstream history and focuses on its “blind spots” and erasures. She asserts that her ancestors too had established their claim to the country through hard and sincere labour. All American immigrants had to put in hard labour in order to survive and build up the country. Maxine suggests that the early Chinese immigrants were no exceptions.

The narrator calls her forefathers “the binding and building ancestors of this place (i.e. America)” because, she asserts, they built railroads in every part of the country – the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad, the Houston and Texas Railroad, the Southern Pacific Railroad, the railroads in Louisiana and Boston, the Pacific North-West and Alaska. These railroads connected America together. She says, “After the Civil War, China Men banded the nation North and South, East and West with crisscrossing steel” (CM 146). Her grandfather Ah Goong could have claimed himself to be an American “for having built the railroad” (CM 145). She thus implicitly insists that Americanness is something to be achieved, and is not simply bequeathed. It is independent of racial origin. It is in consistence with this assertion that she calls her ancestors ‘pioneers’, and establishes them at par with the “pioneering Fathers”, the early settlers from Europe. The narrator thus revises the concept of America as having a European origin only. Immigrants from China had their contributions too. Kingston thus celebrates the heroic, pioneering ventures of the early immigrants for whom the descendants should feel proud. In this way Kingston conveys the message that the progeny can truly claim themselves to be part of America even from the point of view of their ancestry.

Their contributions were, however, not put on record. They were driven out of the public gaze. The girl narrator tellingly comments, “While the demons posed
for photographs, the China Men dispersed. It was dangerous to stay. The Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs” (CM 145). The hostile situation did not allow documentation to take place and ultimately led to the erasure of the immigrants’ contributions to the nation.

In terms of generations the stories of Chinese immigrants and their descendents (in Maxine’s family) may be divided into four categories:

(a) Great Grandfather’s (Bak Goong’s) story

(b) Grandfathers’ stories including those of the ‘railway grandfather’ as narrated in “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains”

(c) Uncles’, aunts’ and father’s stories

(d) Brother’s and cousins’ stories

The first category includes the story of Bak Goong only, he being a representative of the early sojourners and immigrants The second category includes stories of Say Goong, Maxine’s railroad grandfather’s youngest brother; Sahm Goong, the third grandfather; and Kau Goong, an ex-river boat pirate in China and a brother of the narrator’s grandmother. In the third category come Uncle Bun and Maxine’s ‘real’, ‘modern’ aunt and her husband (both Fresh –off- the- Boats immigrating from Hong Kong). The fourth category includes the story of Maxine’s own brother and that of Sao, her cousin. While the former has been portrayed in great detail, the latter gets only a few pages. Lucille and her brother, daughter and son of the ‘real aunt’ from Hong Kong, are just mentioned. All these chapters offer historically layered account of Chinese immigrants and their descendents, and detail the network of intricate family relationships. The older immigrants still maintain these relationships in Chinatowns and outside, in the major US cities, while their
children demonstrate how the relationships gradually weaken due to the adaptation to American mainstream culture. One also learns from these descriptions how a number of male members from a single family used to emigrate to the USA in the past and why, and how the mothers and other relatives, of the immigrants suffering from hunger in China, sent letters, demanding money from the immigrants. The letters from Mad Sao’s mother continued to haunt him even after her death so much that he suffered from a guilt complex and began to see visions of her dead mother chasing him. He actually went to China, visited his mother’s grave and the ghost was finally laid to rest. The ‘ghost’ of his Chinese past is thus symbolically exorcised.

The chapter “Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains” opens with the speaker’s wish to be connected to her ancestors. This wish became stronger when he visited an island carrying memory of the past. The island is popularly called “Chinaman’s Hat”, obviously referring to the hats early Chinese immigrants used to wear while working on the sugarcane plantations in Hawaii (“Sandalwood Mountains”). She then proceeds to tell the story of Bak Goong her great grandfather who was one of the early Chinese migrants during the period of the Gold Rush. The chapter describes the hard labours that the ‘pioneers’ had to do under the hawk-eyed supervisors. “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains” is an imaginary reconstruction of the story of a pioneering China Man, Ah Goong, the narrator’s grandfather, who built railroads with other Chinamen and faced the trials and tribulations of the early period of the Chinese American immigration. Besides giving a vivid description of the construction of the railroad, it describes the strike resorted to by Chinese railroad workers in 1867, as well as incidents of riots against China
Men, San Francisco Fire of 1906 and the like. Through the character of Ah Goong, Kingston presents the alternative story of the historically repressed, the conditions of the early Chinese immigrants – their sense of loneliness, their longing for family affections, their determination to drive roots in the new country, the prejudices it created and so on. In some places appearance of China Men used to ignite violence. He heard ‘gunshots and the yell’, and escaped the Los Angeles Massacre. He was lucky not to be in Colorado when the Denver ‘demons’ burned all China Men’s homes and businesses, nor in Rock Springs, Wyoming, when the miner ‘demons’ killed twenty-eight China Men. He was running elsewhere during the Driving Out from places liked Tacoma, Seattle, Oregon City. In 1902, when the Boston police imprisoned and beat up 234 Chinamen, Ah Goong had already reached San Francisco or China, and perhaps San Francisco again. Thus through the description of Ah Goong on the road, Kingston surveys the racial prejudice and violence in America in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. “The Making of More Americans” deals with the stories of other relatives – both old immigrants and the new. These are the stories which show how through adverse circumstances the early immigrants sought roots, and how gradually their bond with China weakened.

In the book there are some images of the early Chinese immigrants as quarries. They are represented as dehumanised, and reduced to the condition of animals, being hunted down by white people. Bandits, who robbed them, also shot them for practice in the same way they used to shoot ‘Injuns’ (i.e. Red Indians) and Jackrabbits. Ah Gong was afraid that a ‘demon’ (i.e. a white American) might shoot him down from a running train. He commented that in America “the demons killed
for fun and hate" (CM 146). This can happen only in a situation of extreme subjugation, such as in a colonised context. Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* observes that the native of a colonised country is described in ‘zoological’ or ‘bestiary’ terms. He comments that the “colonial world is a Manichaean world” and Manichaeism at times dehumanises the native and turns him into an animal. Kingston makes the point clear that the white Americans, convinced of their own racial superiority, usually looked down upon the early Chinese immigrants as belonging to a sub-human category. She thus implicitly evokes a repressive ‘colonial’ situation.

The early ‘sojourners’ and immigrants were, however, not weak people. They were brave men filled with a spirit of protest. The rites of feminisation, as the chapter “On Discovery” demonstrates, was forcibly imposed on them, but their apparent acceptance of their fate was deceptive. Whenever they got the chance, they protested against cases of injustice. The narrator imagines Ah Goong, a railroad worker, who masturbated into the space from his basket suspended over a valley mountaintop, and called out that he was “fucking the whole world” (CM 133). He registered his protest against his lonely life, against regulations that prevented him from bringing his wife. Ah Goong participated in railroad strikes of 1869. The immigrants are described in heroic, semi-mythical way: “young gods reclining against rocks – long torsos with lean stomachs, …ten thousand heroes.” The grandfather who immigrated to Hawaii to work in the sugarcane plantations was forced to work hard and was whipped by the plantation foreman. But that could not silence him. He went on cursing the oppressors by camouflaging his talk in
coughing. He used a sword forged of word. Kingston gives voice to these Chinese immigrants.

Kingston observes that the Chinese immigrants in her book claim America:

What I am doing in this new book is claiming America .... That seems to be the common strain that runs through all the characters. In story after story Chinese American people are claiming America, which goes all the way from one character saying that a Chinese explorer found this place before Lief Ericsson did to another one buying a house here. Buying that house is a way of saying that America – and not China – is his country.  

The narrator uses this possession of landed property as a symbol for laying claim to America. The descendants of the Third and Fourth grandfathers visit their ancestors’ place in California and reverentially say: “This is the ancestral ground” (CM 171). To the American-born children and grandchildren the “ancestral ground” provides a proof of their belonging to America, and also having strong psychological roots.

In the chapter “The Making of More Americans” Kingston shows how old and new generations developed emotional ties with the country. Old immigrants like Kan Goong had spent a long time in America. Kan Goong decided to ignore the call from China and declared: ”This is my home. I belong here.” (CM 184). Then turning towards others, he roared: “We belong here” (CM 184). The shift from the singular “I” to the plural “we” is significant, specially when he looked for confirmation from the American-born children who had no qualms in calling themselves ‘Americans’. He is very pragmatic in his rejection of China and acceptance of America as the homeland, as he realised that his destiny lies in America. Not all Chinese immigrants could make such a clear choice, as most of them had divided loyalties.

There were many local agents who exploited the poverty of the people and persuaded them to emigrate to America as labourers. They projected a rosy future
and argued persuasively to accept the offers. Kingston recreates a situation in which such an agent approached the family of a prospective emigrant:

“Right now”, said the agent, “we’re offering free passage, free food, free clothing, and housing. In fact, we’re advancing you six dollars. Here, see, I have six dollars right here. Here, Grandma. We’ll let Po Po hold it; she can return it to me if she wants to. Couldn’t you use six dollars before you’ve even begun to work? You repay it with just six weeks’ work. After six weeks, clear profit. (CM 91)

With the help of short, effective sentences and accompanying gestures, the agent builds up his rhetoric to tempt the family to accept the ‘promise ‘of America.

Maxine also describes how the early ‘sojourners’ and immigrants circumvented the strict immigration laws, how they were detained and interrogated at the Immigration Station on the Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay before being allowed entry into the US or sent back to China. She also gives an account of how the immigrants used to contact other China men in the USA, and how they had to struggle for survival after their entry into the country. As to how they used to emigrate, the following description in China Men is worth noting:

These Americans (i.e. Chinese immigrants who were legal citizens of the US) had declared the birth of a new son for every year they had been visiting China and thereby made “slots” for many paper sons. When a Sojourner retired from going-out-on-the road or died, he made another slot. Some body took his place. The last owner of papers taught their buyers the details about the house, the farm, the neighbourhood, the family that were nominally his now. A test book accompanied the papers; the Sojourners who had travelled on that set of papers had recorded the questions the Immigration Demons had asked, and how they had answered (CM 46). 19

The above quotation brings to light the intricate, complicated system with which ‘paper sons’ (false declaration of birth of sons which would facilitate entry of non-relative immigrants) and other immigrants entered America. The narrator points out
to the ingenuity with which they worked out the minor details and documented these in test books for the benefit of future immigrants.

The prospective immigrants who purchased these papers memorised the details because their fate depended on their answers to tricky questions about things that were not seen by them, like the number of windows in their house, number of buffaloes the family owned, the years some one cut his pigtail and the like. Such precautions were necessary because Chinese immigrants were not favourites with the American Immigration officers. He had to undergo humiliating experience at the Angel Island where the immigration office was situated. As the narrator in China Men observes, “the demons (i.e. immigration officers) do not treat people of any other race the way they did Chinese. The few Japanese left in a day or two. It was because their emperor was strong” (CM 55). This is an interesting information that immigration rules were not applied to all in the same way, the Japanese were treated better as they came from a strong nation and the Chinese were ill-treated as at that time China was in a state of chaos and the people were poverty-stricken.

The cultural remoteness of China is reinforced by the politically opposite culture of that country – its Communism. The Chinese Americans react with horror to the inhuman stories of Communist oppression pouring out from China. The rumour mill goes on grinding out stories of murder of innocent people, of the communists breaking up families, separating males from females, of indoctrination, of stories of abject poverty and so on. Relatives in China request or demand money from the immigrants. While the older ones accept such demands as natural, the younger ones are suspicious. The young girl narrator craves for a visit to China, as it will enable her to assess the ground reality there. It will also help her having a
clearer picture of the country she has been hearing of since her childhood. She says in *China Men*, "I want to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there" (CM 87).

The fear of deportation from the USA in case of a discovery of the immigrants' link with Communism also works within them. The narrator mentions that it will be more difficult for her to get permission from her family for a visit to China than getting the visa itself. Because applying for visa would call attention to the family (CM 87). The application will be a source of trouble for both sides: "the relatives in China would get in trouble for having American capitalist connections, and we Americans would be put in relocation camps during the next witch hunt for Communists" (CM 87). The above statement indicates the precarious position of the Chinese immigrants who can claim no absolute security in America as citizens owing to international political conflicts and are haunted by bitter stories of the Japanese American internment experience during the second World War. In *China Men* Mad Sao (called so because of her eccentric behaviour), one of the narrator's cousins decides to visit China to pay obeisance to the restless spirit of his mother who died in China waiting fruitlessly for her son's return. This makes members of his family alarmed. They were afraid that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) would "use their interest in China" to prove their 'un-Americanness' and deport them all (CM 193). Uncle Bun, another character in the same book, with Communist ideas brimming in his head goes back to Communist China. While in America, he spoke eloquently about 'one nation' – a 'world nation', a 'unified planet' – made possible by 'World Communism' (CM 193). He increasingly became paranoid and lived perpetually in fear of being poisoned by the FBI. In an article Sheryl A. Mylan
speaks of the reality of this fear among the Chinese Americans: "Although the worst of the deportation fear was over by the 1950s when Maxine was a girl, the fearful memories from earlier years surely must have remained strong in the tightly knit Chinese communities." Consequently, many immigrants were either secretive or gave a false account of their immigrant experience.

Children of the immigrants who do not know much of this world of 'lies' could not appreciate the world of shadows that cover their parents' lives. The narrator hates this world of 'ghosts', which is not compatible with her American world. She comments, "There are secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China" (WW 183). The old immigrants would not reveal these secrets to their children who had a closer link with the White Americans ('ghosts'). The interference of the 'ghost' culture, the second-generation American-born children's participation in this culture and their uneasiness with, and dislike for, the hush hush ambience of the household and the secrecy of the parents made them appear unsympathetic to their parents who also viewed the new generation with suspicion.

The changed socio-political scenario in China has created a sense of insecurity among Chinese immigrants. The China they knew is no longer there and the new China that has emerged is not known to them. They feel a sense of homelessness due to this changed political situation. They fear that their home country had changed so utterly that they would not only be strangers there but would be unwelcome as well. The fear of deportation has now taken a new turn, and one of the immigrants asks, "Where can they send us now? Hong Kong? Taiwan? I have never been to Hong Kong or Taiwan. The Big Six? Where?" (WW 184). Then the
narrator comments, perhaps on behalf of all the Chinese Americans who live in perpetual fear, "We don’t belong anywhere since the Revolution. The old China has disappeared while we’ve been away" (WW 184).

Here Kingston brings out the sense of instability that lurks in the minds of old Chinese immigrants. Their emotional ties are with the pre-Communist China, and the radical change in the political situation of China has permanently snapped off all relationships with the country. The first generation immigrants may feel nostalgic or may have some correspondence with relatives in China, but cannot go back there. China is reduced to a memory. To their children China is a distant land with a strange culture. Their hopes lie in America where they were born and brought up.

While the struggle in the family continued, the children were growing up. They were being educated in American institutions. American mainstream culture was slowly but surely making inroads into the community life and the mindset of the Chinese Americans. Political developments like the World War II, American involvement in it, and later the drafting for Vietnam War was changing the socio-political complexion of the country. Many young Chinese Americans joined the army and contributed to the cause of the nation, and thought that a new process of integration to the national mainstream would become effective.

The enthusiasm for the Vietnam War, however, does not get approval from Kingston. She, in a subtle way, criticises the issues of drafting in the chapter “Brother in Vietnam” where the narrative strategy alternates between apparent praise of America and an ironic exposure of the reality there. Many Chinese came to America with the utopian idea that the “Gold Mountain does not make war, is not
invaded, and has no draft. The government does not capture men and boys and send
them to war” (CM 269). Immediately after this statement the apparently innocent
narrator describes how during the World War II her father was called for drafting
but was rejected for being ‘too skinny’. Not many people were so fortunate. During
the Vietnam War too drafting continued. In a subtle way America is equated in this
chapter with the Old China where war and conscription were common. The new
China too is not different. It was allegedly sending weapons to the Viet Congs in
Vietnam. Chinese Americans were sent to Taiwan, Vietnam or countries with large
Chinese populations. Perceiving that there is politics in the decision, the narrator
comments that the war would put the Chinese Americans against the Chinese, and
that her brother would be old enough to be drafted (CM 277). And indeed her
brother was drafted.

In the World War II Chinese Americans in the American army, navy and air
force had to fight against Japan. Japan had also invaded China which sent shock
waves among the Chinese. But, ironically, in America the Japanese Americans were
neighbours of the Chinese Americans. Historically, both the ethnic groups shared the
same injustice and violence. Many Chinese Americans, however, showed a strong
anti-Japanese sentiment after the bombing of Pearl Harbour. The young narrator in
China Men brings out the contradiction inherent in any situation where one
marginalized group is set against another. She does not support the American
government’s decision to intern thousands of innocent Japanese Americans in
relocation camps. She is ‘mature’ enough to be aware that the same fate may be in
store for the Chinese Americans in case the Sino-American relationship turns for the
worse in future.
The narrator is thus intensely aware of the socio-political insecurity in their ethnic community that is marginalized in America. She expresses the point through an incident that took place in her school. During the Korean War the school children had to wear ‘dog tags’ which had a column for religion. The narrator refused to accept her mother’s insistence to declare ‘Chinese’ as their religion. The Chinese American school children had ‘O’ (Other) for religion and ‘O’ for race, because they were neither black nor white. She observes that she also had ‘O’ for blood group. Hence she was very much convinced of her inherent ‘otherness’. She had a sense of sharing this experience of ‘otherness’ with other marginalized groups; she “knew it (i.e. ‘O’) was for ‘Other’ because the Filipinos, the Gypsies, and the Hawaiian boy were O’s” (CM 276).

The Vietnam War provided a rare chance to the narrator’s brother to visit Asia and to feel a split in his identity. The brother served in the navy. His ship went to China. In a poetic language the brother’s nostalgia is expressed:

He watched the real China pass by, the old planet his family had left light years ago. Taiwan was not China, a decoy China, a facsimile. He would not find out if the air and flowers of China smelled sweeter than those of California and the sky filled with golden birds, whether promises would come true, time move slower, and life last long (CM 294).

In Taiwan, a country of Chinese people, he feels a sort of connectedness. The narrator observes:

Chinese Americans talk about how when they set foot on China, even just Hong Kong, their whole lives suddenly made sense; their youth had been a preparation for this visit, they say. They realize their Americanness, they say, and “You find out what a China Man you are” (CM 294).

From the border of Taiwan, he saw a valley and distant hills covered with wild vegetation which, the guide said, was the People’s Republic of China. He suddenly
felt an emotional bond with the vast stretches of Chinese land that he could see from distance. Those were the land from where his forefathers had emigrated to America. It was a ‘memory’, a bond that his Americanness cannot sever. In a strange way she realised her Chineseness. For him it was a kind of “homecoming”.

Kingston seems to suggest that the country of one’s ancestors always hold some sway over one’s imagination. However distant and strange it may appear through the stories heard from parents and relatives, it would be romanticised by the children of immigrants who had never visited it. Racism that one faces in America perhaps makes the nostalgic feelings stronger. But the narrator’s brother, like any other second generation Chinese American, must have to return to America where he truly belongs.

3.2 GENDER PERSPECTIVES

The pictures of the old Chinese society of the mainland China and of the male folks there that we find in literary works like China Men are basically misogynist in nature. The narrator in China Men, an American-born second generation Chinese girl, comes across feminist ideas and in the light of these finds the old Chinese socio-political milieu predominantly patriarchal. She mentions her father’s misogynist curses. He used to make remarks such as “Women roll dough to knead out the dirt from between their fingers” (CM 14). The narrator is aware of Chinese proverbs like “A woman without talent is a woman of virtue” or “Better to raise geese than daughters”. She mentions the last proverb in The Woman Warrior (46). She also mentions the proverbial sayings current in the society: “Girls are maggots in rice” (WW 56); “When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not
to pull in girls” (WW 52). Chinese American women writers like Kingston and Amy Tan were critical of female slavery, concubinage, female infanticide and foot binding prevalent in old China. Confucius’s (551-479) teachings gave legitimacy to the widely prevalent misogynist attitudes and practices. Some Chinese American women writers mention that immigrant parents favour their sons and treated daughters as ‘slaves’ even in the US. In China there was a code which postulated three ‘obediences’ and four ‘virtues’. According to the ‘obediences’, a woman is to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and son after her husband’s death, thus keeping her forever under male ‘protection’ and control. According to the four ‘virtues’, a woman is to be chaste, her conversation courteous and not gossipy, her deportment graceful but not extravagant, her leisure to be spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home.

Amy Ling in her book Between Worlds: Women of Chinese Ancestry observes that despite changes in official or public attitude, old ways about women in practice, backed by centuries of history and tradition, have hardly died. Chinese immigrants in isolated enclaves abroad hold tightly to what they had brought from the old country. Although traditions, customs, and practices may have altered or become obsolete in China itself, these are strongly entrenched in the Chinese immigrant psyche in the US. Ling reports that young Chinese women today are still haunted by the misogynist proverbs and attitudes of earlier generations.21

In The Woman Warrior, subtitled “Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts,” the girl narrator takes up her cudgels against such misogynist traditions. The book projects the point of view of the confused narrator who struggles with the ‘ghosts’ of the past. The ‘ghosts’ stand for a number of things – strange stories of old China, its
superstitions and inhibitions, and its overtly patriarchal ideology. The older generation of Chinese immigrants live in an insubstantial world which, according to the perceptions of the American-born narrator, does not have any relevance in the present day America.

Though remote and shadowy, the world has a strong influence on the girl narrator’s life. The mother’s talk-stories render these ‘ghosts’ real. The narrator tries hard to exorcise this presence from her life. This means a movement away from the mother who represents all that is old China. The mother’s strong influence creates an impediment to her self-fulfilment. Born in a typical Chinese family in Stockton, California, and growing up under the mother’s care, the narrator was educated simultaneously in Chinese and ‘American’ schools. This bicultural exposure creates a split consciousness in her, and she was consequently more confused; this applies to other Chinese Americans of her generation as well. In The Woman Warrior she attempts to understand her Chineseness which necessarily means exploration of her relationship with her mother because it is through her ‘talk-stories’ that Chineseness was grafted upon her. She examines her mother’s version of China and Chinese life in the light of her new experience and appropriates only those which make sense to her. Given concepts of Chineseness was overlaid with other perceptions. Hence it is as much a product of fantasy as the memories are. Sidonie Smith observes that the narrator “reads herself into existence through the stories her culture tells about women.” Cheung also says that these stories become her ‘pre-texts’ for ‘self-invention’. The narrator realises that she will have to distance herself from the ‘ghosts’ of her ‘girlhood’ in order to carve out a life of her own.
The narrator feels the need to be a woman warrior in modern America where she has to fight both the hate for the girl child in the family and the racism outside it. Kingston adopts the myth of Fa Mulan (contained in the chant “Ballad of Mulan”) to structure her book The Woman Warrior. Mulan, the eldest daughter in a family, responds to the ruler’s call to fight enemies and successfully leads her army. After her return to the family she faithfully performs her duties as a woman. She is a valiant woman who defeats the enemy but accepts the dictates of the patriarchy. For the narrator the myth comes out handy. The mythic story indicates the existence of a tradition of female heroism in China. She thus evokes the figure of Fa Mulan to examine whether the model is appropriate for emulation in the socio-cultural context of contemporary America. She had listened to this story from her mother several times. She even imagines herself to be a woman warrior who undergoes strict discipline and training under the supervision of an old couple. She recreates a vivid description of how she fulfils the demand of the society as a daughter. The model thus establishes her as a traditional woman who cannot wage war against patriarchy.

The narrator thus must protest against both the patriarchal traits within the community and also against racism that she comes across in the American life. She has a lot of things to protest against (WW 54). She is not very dissimilar to the woman warrior in one respect. She says:

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).

The girl narrator has already ‘reported’ a crime by telling the story of her ‘No Name Woman’ who deviated from the normative behaviour pattern. She has thus, in a
sense, wreaked vengeance. The narrator was very bitter about her parents’ and emigrant villagers’ bias against her own bright academic performance, her winning straight A’s in schools. As a protest she wanted to be a ‘boy’, because boys get appreciation:

I went away to college – Berkeley in the sixties – and I studied, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs. That was for my brother, who returned alive from Vietnam (WW 47).

This shows her resentment against overt patriarchal preferences for boys and bias against girl children. She informs us that a Chinese word for the female ‘I’ is ‘slave’ (WW 47). To fight against this mentality she decided to stop cooking. She cracked dishes while washing, stopped getting straight A’s. All the while she worked on the principle: “Isn’t a bad girl almost a boy?” (WW 47). Nothing worked. She concludes: “Even now China wraps double binds around my feet” (WW 48). This demonstrates her disgust against the immigrant community which continued the old Chinese tradition in America.

The story of “No Name Woman” helps her to understand how the Chinese misogynist tradition continues even in America. The social situation prevalent during the time of the “No Name Woman” was repressive for women. There was no way a woman could escape it, though an erring male member could always escape censure. The woman, the narrator’s aunt, was a “Gold Mountain Wife.” After her husband’s departure for America she was found to be pregnant. It was thought that she conceived out of an illicit relationship. The villagers, who were watching, severely punished her. She committed suicide. The aunt never gave out the details of the incident or the identity of the author of the mischief. She preferred silence. The
narrator throws open all sorts of possibilities: she might have been lured, trapped and then raped by a person she knew well. She might have been threatened not to disclose his name. The narrator comments: “Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil.” (WW 6). Or the aunt might have been ‘a lone romantic’ in love with a man she appreciated. The narrator imagines that her aunt, “caught in a slow life, let dreams grow and fade and after some months or years went toward what persisted. Fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate, wire and bone” (WW 8).

Adultery is a crime that disturbs the smooth patrilineal descent. The traditional Chinese society believed that “a family must be whole, faithfully keeping the descent line by having sons to feed the old and the dead, who in turn look after the family” (WW 13). The aunt disturbed this law by conceiving an illegitimate child. The female body on which the female deviance was inscribed must endure the social reprimand, and had ultimately to be destroyed. The aunt was forced by circumstances to commit suicide. The narrator, as an American-born Chinese American who wants to be ‘American-feminine,’ looks upon the aunt as a heroic person. In her aunt’s deviance, she finds the relevance of her own struggle: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (WW 8). She must act against the norms in the immigrant society that restricts her movement and behaviour. She considers the aunt as her ‘forerunner’, as one who “crossed boundaries not delineated in space” (WW 8). By imagining her story, the narrator tries to give her a voice. The act of devoting ‘pages of paper to her’ is an act of rehabilitation of the aunt which is relevant to her own struggle. Sidonie Smith considers the girl narrator’s “appropriation of the pen, that surrogate sword” to be
an act of reporting of a crime. She asserts that the narrator publicly inscribes, not the story of the aunt only but of those she heard or experienced in the entire range of “her own childhood among ghosts.”

The mother, however, shared the traditional opinion which was in favour of punishing the erring woman. She was blind to the woman’s physical and emotional needs, or to the possibility that a woman might be a victim to a man’s lust. She had internalised the social norms created at the instance of patriarchy. She connived at the family’s attempt to erase the woman’s existence altogether. Her revelation of the aunt’s story to her daughter was done in a secret manner:

“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 that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born” (WW 3)

The mother projects the aunt as a negative model. She told the cautionary tale to warn the growing girl. She ends the story with a moral: “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.” (WW 5). The narrator who sees her aunt as a positive model for building up her resistance, projects her as a victim of patriarchy.

Brave Orchid, the narrator’s mother, was a courageous woman in a conventional sense. She was educated in To Keung School of Midwifery in China and became a shaman. She travelled widely in the Chinese countryside and performed her professional duties. By taking up a professional life she transgressed the traditional boundary. Hence in her daughter’s eyes she was a kind of woman warrior. Both the mythic woman warrior and Brave Orchid left the family circle but returned to serve the community in a conventional way.
Although the mother is called a brave warrior in the text and there are some evidences of her attempts to realise a kind of selfhood, on the whole she works within the larger patriarchal structure. Her concept of selfhood, as we shall see, is compromised for the greater need of community and is in consonance with the assumptions of patriarchy. She enforces the legitimacy of the old culture, and ultimately works towards subordination of female selfhood when it is in conflict with patriarchy. She thus becomes an accomplice in her husband’s deliberate erasure of the memory of his deviant sister – Maxine’s ‘no name aunt’. The daughter’s narrative shows that Brave Orchid is strong only on her own turf – the old China – and her notions are so outdated and irrelevant in the immigrant space that her image of a woman warrior suffers considerably.

She could not master the English language. She lacks both the will and skill for acculturation and assimilation. Despite being a trained midwife, she had to work indoors in the family laundry business. In dealing with her sister, who came from China to America to reclaim her husband, Brave Orchid betrayed ignorance of the civil practices in America. She did not know that bigamy is illegal in America. She insisted that her sister Moon Orchid should force her husband to accept her as the “Big Wife” which is inconceivable in twentieth century America.

The Chinese immigrant parents, though physically separated from their own country, generally clung to their own cultural roots. Early immigrants faced racial prejudices and violence; nevertheless, they contributed to the making of America, and had developed an emotional attachment to its soil. Although they lay claim to America and considered themselves ‘Americans’, they lived in China towns and did not have much interaction with the mainstream life. On the whole, they retained
their old mindset. Their consciousness was filled with the memories of their lives and time in China. The narrator notices this contradiction in her parents. She says that whenever her parents mentioned “home”, they suspended America (WW 99). The loss of a “home land” is an inevitable result of immigration, and in their imagination the narrator’s parents travelled to their ancestral land with nostalgic eyes. From the immigration space, which they now find to be a land of hard toil and struggle, they often idealise their homeland. The social evils or economic depravity that they had escaped evaporate for the time being and the brighter aspects that they nourish about China in their minds come to the forefront. With old Chinese cultural norms firmly entrenched in their minds, they live on the model of old Chinese norms in the very heart of America. Brave Orchid, for instance, lived her life behind a wall of Chinese culture – in the midst of her own community. Veronica Wang rightly points out that she is “a Chinese sojourner in America whose ways are thoroughly Chinese in spite of her many years of American residency.”26 The lack of an effective dialogue with the larger American reality made her culturally handicapped. She for ever resides in a ghetto with a ghetto mindset.

The narrator wants to come out of this ghettoed life which speaks of insubstantial, shadowy figures of “ghosts”. She wants to come out of the insulated community that terms white Americans as “ghosts” and forbids an inter-cultural interaction. Within this circumscribed existence, Chinese women’s voices are further stifled. For the narrator, therefore, it was an arduous struggle to find a voice of her own. According to Mary Field Belensky, the voice is “more than an academic shorthand for a person’s point of view... it is a metaphor that can apply to many aspects of women’s experience and development... Women repeatedly used the
metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development...the developments of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined."

One of the central notions that obsesses Maxine is the struggle for a voice against silence. Silence is the fate decreed to the traditional women. This aspect gains emphasis in the last narrative, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” In this chapter she objects to her mother’s cutting of her fraenum (or frenum) during her childhood – an act which literally muffles possibilities of speech and thus voice. She subconsciously associates this mutilation, this ‘tampering with speech’ (WW 165), with the Chinese custom of ‘foot binding.’ This traditional act of her mother thus assumes gender connotations. Maxine further connects the cutting of her fraenum with ethnic reality in the USA, the mutilation affecting her right of speech. This gets associated also with her lack of English proficiency. She accuses her mother for not teaching her English, the consequence of which stretches beyond the classroom:

> When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness - a shame - still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say “hello” casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out encounter, or ask directions of a bus driver (WW 165).

Her silence was the ‘thickest’ during the first three years at the America school which worried her teachers. However, she discovered that other Chinese girls who were noisy at the Chinese school did not talk either, which made her come to the conclusion that “the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (WW 166), thus connecting her silence ultimately to the Chinese cultural norms.

As she grows mature and musters courage to oppose her mother’s point of view, she starts criticising the Chinese school system and culture. She announces that she will stop going to Chinese school and will ultimately join an American
college. She is clearly drawn towards American education and cultural values which privilege speech over silence, and logic over ‘irrational’ talk-stories that held sway over her life so long. For her living in the claustrophobic ghettoed life would not allow her to see the real world. She decides “to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I (i.e. the narrator) learned to think that mysteries are for explanation … Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts” (WW 204). This is her way of driving out ‘ghosts’ from her life. She gradually emerges from the confused in-between state, and moves away from her mother’s world, where women’s education is discouraged (“the bad temper, the laziness, the clumsiness, the stupidity that comes from reading too much” WW 194), to the ‘American’ competition-oriented educational system (getting straight A’s in examinations). She was also encouraged by her ‘American’ teachers to live freely – she decided to join clubs, to date and dance at school. All of these were positively discouraged in the traditional Chinese American society. The narrator herself realised that acquiring these social habits ensures greater social mobility and helps the process of integration to the social fabric of the nation. An insular life in the China town blocks all possibilities of participation in the greater American life. She thus holds brief for a hybrid life when she narrates and transforms the mythic story of Ts’ai Yen.

As the girl narrator and her contemporaries privileged the “American” educational and cultural system, they began to be considered in an unfavourable light by their parents and older members of the community. The immigrant parents were sceptical about their children because they had been born among ‘ghosts’ (i.e. white Americans), were taught by ‘ghosts’. The American-born children, according to these parents, were “ghost-like” (WW 183). To the Chinese immigrant parents,
their Americanised children were really “noisy and full of air; they talk during meals. They talk about everything” (WW 184). The “ghost” (i.e. mainstream) culture thus created rifts between two Chinese American generations.

The narrator wants to come out of this world because it condemns her as a girl child and deprives her of the opportunity to come in contact with new people in the wider world. In a quieter, and friendlier interaction with her mother at another point of time, she tells her mother, “I don’t want to hear Wino Ghosts and Hobo Ghosts. I’ve found some places in the country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there ... Here I’m sick so often I can barely work. I can’t help it, Mama” (WW 108). Brave Orchid recognised her daughter’s need for a freer life and thus granted her permission to venture out. Her address of endearment “Little Dog” lifted the weight out from the narrator’s heart. While Brave Orchid remained chained to her Chinatown mentality, she allowed her daughter to go her own way.

The narrator is now confident of her English, and her intelligence and skill in making her way into the mainstream life. She is sufficiently acculturated now. But she knows that she cannot deny her Chinese heritage, neither can she deny the relevance of the mainstream education and social life for an American-born Chinese American girl like her. The importance of an interaction between two cultures is emphasised in the story of Ts’ai Yen in the last chapter of the book.

The Woman Warrior closes with the mythic story of Ts’ai Yen, a poetess, who was abducted by a barbarian chieftain. She bore him two children during her twelve-year stay with him. Her children did not speak or understand Chinese. They laughed at her ‘sing-song words’. She learned from the barbarians a music which had a high note. They used to play this music on their flutes. Ts’ai Yen appropriated the tune
and used it in her own song. The "words seemed to be Chinese but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger" (WW 209). When she went back home, she carried her songs from the savage land. One such song is "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe". It is "a song that Chinese sing well to their own instrument. It translated well." (WW 209).

This is how Kingston ends The Woman Warrior. It is a collaborative story with the beginning, told by the mother. The ending was, however, added by the daughter. As the narrator has learned to tell 'talk stories' now, she has transformed it in a way that suited best in the new environment. A new situation obviously requires a new myth, and the narrator tries to create a new myth out of the old. Both the narrator and the author Kingston convey the message that it is quite natural that in the immigrant space two cultures should meet, and exchange cultural contents to their mutual benefit, and experiment with form or make stylistic adaptations. The myth explores the possibilities of cultural translation or cultural hybridisation in the immigrant space.

The story can also be seen, as King-Kok Cheung does, as a carrying forward of a mother's story by a daughter. Cheung observes that the way in which the myth is continued by the daughter signifies the passing of a maternal legacy to the daughter.28 It should, however, be noted that the daughter shaped the story according to her own situation and requirements. In this sense, the story is relevant to contemporary time. It should also be kept in mind that the narrator does not reject the Chinese culture or heritage. There is only transformation or adaptation to the new culture, a remaking of the old myth in the American context. Cheung points out that the girl narrator, as her narrative suggests, continues to draw extensively on
Chinese legends, although in 'mutated forms’. This indicates that the stories “have become ever much a part of the narrator’s (and the author's) self, thanks to her mother’s influence. These stories, no less than the lessons she learns in American schools, inform her ways of knowing and becoming”\textsuperscript{29}. The observation that the high note of the barbarians can be adapted to the Chinese music suggests that hybridisation can be a viable solution in a multicultural world. The narrator is now a teller of 'talk stories', an artist, and can draw her artistic resources from both 'Chinese' and 'American' cultures to create a new cultural synthesis.

Joy Luck Club (1989), Amy Tan’s first novel, is based on family narratives. Chinese American milieu in a San Francisco neighbourhood provides the main characters. Although there are four families in the novel – the Woos, the Jongs, the Hsus and the St. Clairs – the focus is mainly on mother and daughter characters, and their relationship. There are sixteen loosely connected narratives. These are told by seven of the eight women characters – four daughters and their mothers. These stories are grouped into four sections and arranged according to theme and generation. An introductory thematic tale/myth precedes the mothers’ and/or daughters’ stories in each section. The mother-daughter pairs in the four families are Suyuan and Jing-mei Woo, An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordon, Lindo and Waverly Jong, and Ying-ying and Lena St.Clair.

The stories in the novel move back and forth between the USA and China, between early and late twentieth century. On the temporal plane incidents move both vertically and horizontally. In an article called “Daughter-Text / Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan’s Joy Luck Club”, Marina Heung asserts that the book demands a reading that is “simultaneously diachronic and synchronic.”\textsuperscript{30} Heung also
observes: "the reader's construction of interconnections between motif, character, and incident finally dissolves individualized character and plot and instead collectivizes them into an aggregate meaning existing outside the individual stories themselves." 31

The title of the book is derived from the name of a club founded in wartime Kweilin by Suyuan Woo. The club, with a magnificent mah jong table at the centre, was a manifestation of a strong will among its members to survive. As a strategy for survival through difficult times, the members in Kweilin tried to arrange "feast", to "celebrate good fortune, and play (mah jong) with seriousness and think of nothing else but adding to happiness through winning" (JLC 11). Suyuan observes, "It's not that we had no heart or eyes for pain. We were all afraid. We all had our miseries. But to despair was to wish back for something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable" (JLC 11-12). The club was thus founded with the obvious objective of keeping the members' minds off the tragic times. Thinking only of the good aspects of life would give 'hope' a chance.

Joy Luck Club was given a new face in 1949 after Suyuan Woo's arrival in America. The four mothers mentioned earlier were its members. They told each other stories to raise their spirits. For the mothers who had left 'unspeakable tragedies' behind in China, the moments in the club were moments of joy. The activities in the club were also necessary for the mothers for another reason. For these unacculturated women American social landscape was prohibitive. For survival they needed one another's company. In the first chapter of the first section Jing-mei Woo, also known as June, explained the background of the club and stated its basic philosophy – to be optimistic – which motivated its members. Jing-mei
Woo finds herself extremely uncomfortable when she was asked to take the place of her recently deceased mother at the mah jong table at a session of the club. This act opens up a territory of unknown history. The three members of the club – the three mothers -- tell her about her twin half-sisters her mother was forced to abandon in China during the war. Jing-mei had earlier gathered that Suyuan Woo, her mother, was a war victim. She had to flee Kweilin with her two babies to escape Japanese invasion and bombing of the town. On her way she became ill and lost everything. When asked about the babies, she only told her: “Your father is not my first husband. You are not those babies” (JLC 14). Jing-mei reports that her mother repeated the story several times but the ending always remained mysterious and open-ended. The ending, she says, “grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, eventually into mine” (JLC 7). And now the club meeting the other mothers inform her that her half-sisters abandoned in China have at last been found. They offer her $1200 to travel to China to visit her half-sisters, and to tell them about their mother. The mothers feel that a daughter must know her mother intimately, that a mother and her daughter are inseparable.

Mothers are attached to their daughters because they think that they have a duty to maintain continuity of culture through their training of their daughters. They want a continuity of matrilineality. Ben Xu rightly observes in an article that the club members (all mothers), by sending Jing-mei to her half-sisters to tell them about their mother, try to ensure “an experiential relation between the past and the present, projecting a future as well.” This continuity must be carried forward by generations of women.
The mother characters, while recapitulating their past, see themselves as survivors, wading through war, famine and injustice of an overtly patriarchal world. They want to instil a sense of hope in their daughters who may have to face an uncertain future in the USA. But they regret that the American-born daughters cannot understand their “Chinese ways of thinking” which give importance to luck and fate, and also to tricks and strategies as necessary tools for survival. Ben Xu argues that survival mentality is part of the living conditions in China, and is deeply rooted in the history of its disasters and hardships. ‘Survival’, according to him, is a key concept in the Chinese psyche, a concept that the mothers carry even in America. He offers the following information:

The word in Chinese that denotes “making a living in the world” is qiusheng – seeking survival, or mousheng – managing survival. The Chinese classics are full of wisdom on how to survive, whether it be Taoist escapism, Confucian doctrine of the mean, or Legalist political trickery. The lack of religion and of a systematic belief in an after-life in Chinese culture indicates the preoccupation with the urgency of surviving in the present world.

Considering that having survival strategies is urgent, the mothers seek to convey to the daughters their own stories of survival through struggle and strategies. They do not evidently work for the revival of the traditional, overtly patriarchal Chinese society in which their daughters would face the same sufferings they themselves had undergone. They, on the contrary, intend to drive home the point that the daughters must have hope like their mothers’ and learn to survive through all crises.

The Chinese female immigrants, after their arrival in America, became conscious of their own ethnicity, and develop gender awareness. While in the process of settling down in America, they are always haunted by a sense of
insecurity. This sense of uncertainty demands new strategies for survival. Within the family also there develop gaps in communication.

To understand the mothers' points of view one has to know how they had lived in China. All the mother characters had very unhappy lives. This was nothing unusual as the patriarchy forced its dictates on women who then suffered through generations. Even women members of the family participated in the acts of oppression. An-mei Hsu, mother of Rose Hsu Jordon, recounts how her own mother was declared a 'ghost' by her family. An-mei explains that the word 'ghost' did not necessarily mean a dead person. She says: "In those days, a ghost was anything we were forbidden to talk about. So I knew Poppo (i.e. the grandmother) wanted me to forget my mother on purpose" (JLC 33). Before her death Poppo summoned An-mei to say: "Never say her name." This injunction is similar to Brave Orchid's warning to the narrator in The Woman Warrior not to utter her aunt's ("No Name Woman") name. In An-mei’s mother’s case, the social sanction came against her because she was raped by a rich merchant and forced to be his concubine. An-mei emphasises gender bonding, and a matrilineal connection. An-mei later perceives that a common fate of unhappiness also binds them together. Thinking of her daughter's marriage which was falling apart, she says:

Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way (JLC 241).

This is the reflection of a woman who had experienced unhappiness in her grandmother’s house without the soothing presence of the mother, and, later in the house of a rich merchant, where her mother was a concubine.
Ying-Ying, another immigrant mother had also a very unhappy marriage in China. When she conceived, her husband left her for another woman. She decided to undergo an abortion. Much later after the abandonment, when she received the news of her husband's death, she agreed to marry Clifford St. Clair, a large, pale American, who courted her for four years in China. They later migrated to America.

Lindo Jong, the fourth mother, accepted an unhappy marriage as a filial duty. The young husband was discovered to be impotent. She later came out of the marriage using a ruse which simultaneously allowed her not to be disobedient either to her own parents or to her mother-in-law. She convinced the latter that she received in her dream a divine instruction that her husband should take a servant-girl as a concubine and permit her to leave the marriage. As the mother-in-law was superstitious and was convinced of certain 'signs' of what the 'dreams' predicted, she let Lindo walk out of the marriage. Lindo soon migrated to the USA.

All of them escaped the war-ravaged, overtly patriarchal China, but traces of their old lives remained in their new lives. Their daughters, born and brought up in the USA, looked at the past lives of their mothers with wonder and disbelief. But as they learned more about their mothers, they came to understand them better.

In "Lost Lives of Women" Amy Tan speaks of a family photograph that inspired her to write of her 'foremothers':

When I first saw this photo as a child, I thought it was exotic and remote, of a far-away time and place, with people who had no connection to my American life. Look at their bound feet! Look at that funny lady with plucked forehead. The solemn little girl was, in fact, my mother. And leaning against the rock is my grandmother, Jing-mei ... This is also a picture I see when I write. These are the secrets I was supposed to keep. These are the women who never let me forget why stories need to be told.
Thus seeing women in deplorable conditions, their lives crushed through social injunctions, surely needs a voice to reveal the truth of their lives. Amy Tan expresses this desire for letting her mother know that she had done her filial duty.

When I was writing, it was so much for my mother and myself ... I wanted her to know what I thought about China and what I thought about growing up in this country (i.e. the USA). And I wanted those words to almost fall off the page so that she could just see the story, that the language should be simple enough, almost like a little curtain that would fall away.35

Amy Tan intends to uncover and review her mother’s life in China and to show her what her daughter, growing up in a free and more liberal country, thought of her mother’s plight. The daughters are horrified by it but the stories are crafted by the mothers as a manifestation of a culture or tradition. Tan’s intention in the novel is to bring together the perspectives of both the mothers and daughters to have a comprehensive view of cultural differences and the need for a gender bonding.

Amy Tan writes about the cultural differences that exist within Chinese families, between mothers and daughters. The inability of both the mothers and the daughters to understand each other springs mainly from their being groomed in two different cultures. The immigrant mothers, who fled from China, held on to the Chinese cultural norms they were brought up on. Their daughters’ lives in America are imbued with a different set of norms which clash with those of their mothers. ‘Talking back’, which is a grave offence to the mothers, is a habit with the daughters who refuse to accept anything blindly or without argument. Although the mothers were silenced by the dictates of patriarchy in China, they tried to silence their daughters. Ying-ying, a daughter, thus complains, “A girl can never ask, only listen” (JLC 68). This is a contradiction that the mothers could not help, because they were deeply immersed in the age-old customs and traditional habits of their ancestral land.
David Leiwei Li comments that "the maternal lessons are all derived from a pre-immigration and pre-American era. As faithful daughters of China, the mothers may mature and age in America, but their minds and memories are forever mummified in their ancestral land."36

The daughters thus resented their mothers' attempt to control their lives. Their responses to their mothers' behaviour range from simple boredom to indignation. Waverly as a young girl reacts angrily to her mother's attempt to appropriate the fame she wins as a young chess player. Jing-mei too is deeply disturbed when her mother experiments to make her a child prodigy. As a protest she tried hard to frustrate her mother's attempt to impose her own ambition on her daughter. Jing-mei felt that she must assert herself and fall short of her mother's expectations. As a result she did not get straight A's in examinations, and even dropped out of college. This very act of a girl asserting her own individuality goes against the norms of Chinese immigrant society. She went on refusing to be moulded in the way her mother wanted her to be. Her protest was loud and clear, "I won't be what I am not" (JLC 144), and more severely, "I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China" (JLC 152).

Mothers and daughters often do not understand each other. Waverly Jong fails to understand why her mother attaches more importance to 'luck' and 'tricks' than to 'skill' and 'smartness'. Her mother's "attack" (JLC 191) appears to be non-heroic and shamefully 'Chinese'. Lindo Jong uses a line to show the strategy: "How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities". The mother knows that it is hard to keep the "Chinese face" in America (JLC 294), Jing-mei also does not understand her
mother’s explanation of the difference between the Chinese mah jong game and the Jewish one: “Entirely different kind of playing”, she said in English, “Jewish mah jong, they watch only for their own tile, play only with their eyes”. Then she switched to Chinese and spoke “Chinese mah jong, you must play using your head, very tricky. You must watch what every body else throws away and keep that in your head as well. And if nobody plays well, then the game becomes like Jewish mah jong. Why play? There is no strategy. You’re just watching people make mistakes”. (JLC 22-23). Jing-mei says: “These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese” (JLC 23). When Jing-mei was not sure what and how to tell her half-sisters in China about her mother, Auntie An-mei is scandalised, and says: “Your mother is in your bones!” (JLC 31). Jing-mei’s explanation is worth noting:

They are frightened. In me they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English... They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation (JLC 31).

The mothers’ anxiety that they have failed to pass on the tradition of customs and beliefs to their children is clearly underscored in the above extract. This is what worries them throughout most of the novels of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston discussed in this chapter.

Despite misunderstanding, both the mothers and the daughters wanted to understand each other. The mothers’ gestures often initiated a soothing effect on their daughters. On an occasion Jing-mei was offered the piano she used to play in
her childhood. It was considered by the daughter as a sign of forgiveness. She was relieved of a tremendous burden. Later on her mother presented her a jade pendant with the words that convey her long-cherished desire for a connection: “For a long time, I wanted to give you the necklace. See, I wore this on my skin, so when you put it on your skin, then you know my meaning. This is your life’s importance” (JLC 235).

The ‘American’ daughters do not often appreciate this longing for connection. The mothers are forced to stand outside their daughters’ lives which, in the words of the critic M. Marie Booth Foster, is “a most undesirable place”36. The mother cannot understand how a daughter can think of herself as a separate entity. Lindo Jong recounts an episode in which this mentality is evident:

“Finish your coffee”, I told her yesterday. “Don’t throw your blessings away.”
“Don’t be so old-fashioned, Ma,” she told me, finishing her coffee down the sink. “I’m my own person.”
And I think, How can she be her own person? When did I give her up? (JLC 290).

The individual identity acquired by the daughter (“I’m my own person”) through American education is what the mother cannot understand. Traditionally, Chinese women were taught not to think in terms of individual entity. To them to acquire an individual identity was to drive a wedge between the mother and the daughter, or more broadly, between the daughter and the family. Mothers and daughters are supposed to be parts of the same identity. The American experience has imparted a new self-awareness in the daughters, and this creates much anxiety in the mothers. This anxiety of separation from, and loss of control over, their daughters is best expressed by Ying-Ying when she observes that a girl, even though she springs from her mother like a “slippery fish”, swims away ever since (JLC 274). The motherly
anguish for keeping control over the daughters and trying to keep them within the same cultural fold creates misunderstanding and tension in the novels of both Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston.

*Joy Luck Club* also raises the question of how diasporic people are accepted in the country of origin. The mothers in the book, who try to preserve Chinese socio-cultural norms in America, do not fully realise that they too have changed after their immigration. From her recent trip to China, Lindo realises that she is not considered “hundred percent Chinese” by the native people of China. Her daughter, who wants to visit China, feels that she might be fully “blended” with the Chinese population in China. But her mother assures her that they would instinctively mark her out as a foreigner. Lindo says, “You don’t even need to open your mouth. They already know you are an outsider” (*JLC* 288). Thus the Chinese in China does not endorse their Chineseness. The Chinese Americans thus suffer from the problem of a lack of identification with a particular people or a nation. Their hybrid identity cannot be hidden. Consequently, they are alienated from their ancestral country. They are considered alien in the country where they have emigrated from. In America also their visible “Chineseness” marks them with ‘foreignness’, becomes an excuse for their perpetual ‘foreignness’ and therefore their alienation in the USA.

Lindo Jong has her own idea of hybridity but it is basically doomed to failure. She says that she wanted her children “to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character” (*JLC* 289). But living in the American circumstances necessarily means a transformation of the “Chinese character”. One cannot keep one’s Chineseness unchanged; it invariably gets ‘translated’ or transformed according to the norms of the American society. Mutual
interaction between the two cultures results in a hybrid identity of the Chinese Americans, which cannot contain the integrity of either.

Amy Tan’s second novel The Kitchen God’s Wife (1991) continues the same trends. It is emphatically about mother-daughter relationship. The focus is limited to a single paradigmatic mother-daughter pair. The mother Winnie Louie’s (her maiden name in China was Jiang Weili) life in China is the centre of focus. The story demonstrates that Chinese women’s lives in general were controlled by the norms set down by Confucius. The story of Winnie is told by Winnie herself. She had suffered in the hands of overtly patriarchal forces and yet she cannot easily approve of her own daughter’s liberated lifestyle. So, the novel becomes a chronicle of a Chinese American community life, trapped between two civilizations.

Standing between two languages, two cultural norms and two histories, the characters develop split personalities. In the daughter Pearl Louie Brandt, who was born and brought up in America and married a white American, the symptoms of the split personality is more evident. Although she was brought up in a Chinese American household, she had no difficulty in adapting to the mainstream culture. But in the eyes of her husband Phil Brandt and other white people, her ‘Chineseness’ remains too evident. This imposition of ethnicity is quite commonplace in the USA. Other Chinese Americans have also undergone the same experience. For instance Helen Zia, a Chinese American woman, in a book significantly titled Asian American Dream: The Emergence of an American People (2000) speaks of her personal experience of a belied expectation and a blunt denial: “Armed with standard English and my flat New Jersey ‘a’, I still couldn’t escape the name
calling". With such knowledge firmly ingrained, one can hardly feel integrated or can hardly escape from a divided psyche.

Pearl hardly understands her mother's behaviour and beliefs. Winnie too cannot understand Pearl all the time. Consequently, they have an uncomfortable relationship, one of incomprehension and distrust. Each is afraid that the other would not understand her. Thus each shuts herself off from the other. Both the mother and the daughter have 'secrets' which would have remained secrets but for the mediation of Helen, Pearl's 'aunt'. On Helen's insistence, Winnie agreed to reveal her own secret. She had a terribly oppressive conjugal life in China. Her husband Wen Fu was ruthless and monstrous in nature. He was a person who tortured her physically and mentally. He was insensitive to Winnie's feelings and well-being. Win Fu was responsible for the deaths of their daughters and a son. Winnie had several abortions. She fled from the marriage and emigrated to America with the help of Jimmie whom she married later. Winnie then revealed that Pearl was the daughter of Wen Fu. The revelation shocked Pearl. This also brought in Pearl a sense of deep sympathy for the mother, the unknown part of whose life made her re-view their relationship in a new light. Pearl then revealed her own secret. She had been suffering from a difficult disease – multiple sclerosis (ms). When Winnie came to know of it she became furious. She felt that she could have done something for her in her own Chinese way even when modern medicine failed. With their secrets revealed now, the distance between them disappeared.

From the beginning of the novel their mutual dislikes are made prominent. Pearl, culturally an American girl, sees her mother, who, through dissemination of Chinese cultural norms, blocks her integration to the American way of life. She
resents her mother not allowing her to follow American social practices like dating or wearing cosmetics. She dislikes her mother’s interferences in her own privacy. She wants her own space where she can breathe freely. The schoolgirl loudly protests when her mother disallows her intended visits to a seaside resort.

In an episode which took place much before the revelation of her mother’s past, Pearl was slapped repeatedly by her mother. Apparently, Pearl’s refusal to see her father Jimmie’s dead body in the coffin caused the outburst. The mother rued that her 14-year-old daughter did not cry to mourn his death. It was, in the mother’s opinion, an unpardonable offence, a severe lapse in the filial bond. But Pearl had her own logic. She was gradually becoming disenchanted with her ailing father’s behaviour. He had been quite a different person earlier – charming, lively, strong and kind, quite a contrast to her high-handed, overbearing mother. But, on his deathbed, he was a transformed person – sick, listless, moaning and helpless. When asked by her mother why she was not crying, the girl retorted, “That man is not my father” (KGW 45). Winnie, who judged the comment quite literally, was shocked and slapped Pearl repeatedly. Pearl fled from the spot, skipped the funeral and had a life-long feeling of guilt. Much later, after Pearl’s marriage, Winnie discovered in her daughter’s room a small card. It had a picture of Jesus on one side; and on the other young Pearl had written: “In loving memory, James Y. Louie”. The mother was glad to realise that the daughter was not ungrateful after all.

Pearl sees her mother as the ‘other’ whose strange, meaningless discourse on alternative ways of ‘cure’ she wants to avoid. She is afraid of Winnie’s theory of “Nine Bad Fates” which, in the mother’s language, is like this: “a person is destined to die if eight bad things happen. If you don’t recognize the eight ahead of time and
prevent them, the ninth one is always fatal" (KGW 29). Pearl cannot stand Winnie’s ruminating over “what the eight bad things might have been, how she should have been sharp enough to detect them in time” (KGW 29). The following extract indicates how Pearl sees her mother, from her own hybrid cultural location, as a ‘Chinese other’ and why she finds it difficult to interact with her:

To this day it drives me crazy, listening to her various hypotheses, the way religion, medicine, and superstition all merge with her own beliefs. She puts no faith on other people’s logic — to her, logic is a sneaky excuse for tragedies, mistakes, and accidents. And according to my mother, nothing is an accident. She is like a Chinese version of Freud, or worse. Everything has a reason. Everything could have been prevented (KGW 29).

Her mother’s belief is embedded in a deeply entrenched system of belief in fate an pre-determination of everything where an individual’s choice or control has no importance. Similarly, she believes that there are certain Chinese ways of finding a cure, a cure that Western medical science does not know.

Thus immediately after the disclosure of Pearl’s disease, Winnie diagnoses that Wen Fu, whose blood runs through Pearl, is the source of the disease. Pearl’s comment that the disease cannot be genetically transferred falls flat on her mother. Pearl also says that nothing that her mother can do would help her. This only intensifies her anger. When Pearl says all that, a strange sensation seizes her:

But all of a sudden I realized: I didn’t want her to stop. I was relieved in a strange way. Or perhaps relief was not the feeling. Because the pain was still there. She was tearing it away — my protective shell, my anger, my deepest fears, my despair. She was putting all this into her own heart, so that I could finally see what was left. Hope (KGW 401-2).

At this point Pearl realises that her mother’s ‘interference’ issues from her selfless love and affection for her daughter, that Winnie passionately wants her to be cured. This realisation brings about a sea change in her attitude towards her mother. At the
end of the novel we find the mother and daughter closer than ever. This re-establishes the traditional matrilineal relationship common in China.

One notices that the sympathy between mothers and daughters is not limited to a single generation; it runs on in the mother’s tale also. Winnie recounts her own mother’s tale. Her mother was a ‘rebel’; she was not ready to take everything for granted. She fell in love with Lu, a young ‘Marxist’ with a revolutionary dream of changing China. She was, however, married off to an old man with five wives and was obviously unhappy. Educated by missionaries and inspired by revolutionary ideas, she did not fit into a conventional Chinese household with strong patriarchal leanings. She left the family. The family also erased her name. But for Winnie she was an eternal presence, a ‘connection’ she cannot forget. That is why Winnie tells her daughter that in her heart there is a little room for her mother.

While narrating her mother’s story, Winnie severely criticises feudal ideas about women’s education and rejects the tradition of Confucianism. Winnie began to respect her mother and realises that her mother was not an ordinary woman. Her mother had ‘unbound’ her own feet and hence according to some, ‘she ran wild’ (KGW 100). The uncle’s statement — “All the will and stubbornness that should have been given to a boy went into her” — suggests how society looked upon girls as inferior creatures. The ‘male’ qualities of aggression and initiative are not to be imitated by girls. Now since her mother had taken her stand “against Confucius (i.e. Confucius’s) thinking” (KGW 103), she could act like ‘men’. She says that her Old Aunt, an uneducated person, was raised in a feudal family in a ‘the traditional way’ which is described like this:
The girl’s eyes should never be used for reading, only for sewing. The girl’s ears should never be used for listening to ideas, only to orders. The girl’s lips should be small, rarely used, except to express appreciation or ask for approval (KGW 102).

The effect of education, particularly of Western education, on a Chinese girl (here, Winnie’s mother) is described by the Old Aunt like this:

They put Western thoughts into a Chinese mind, causing everything to ferment. It is the same way eating foreign food – upset stomach, upset mind. The foreign teachers want to over-turn all order in the world. Confucius is bad, Jesus is good! Girls can be teachers, girls do not have to marry .... Upside-down thinking! (KGW 103).

The aunt of course did not forget to issue a warning to Winnie: “Look what happened to your mother” (KGW 103). She attacks Confucius and the hierarchy that he preached: “I don’t know why everyone always thought Confucius was so good, so wise. He made everyone look down on someone else, women were the lowest!” (KGW 103).

At the end of the novel Winnie’s own act of going against the Confucian norms – her rebellion against her former husband Wen Fu and all that he stood for – culminates in the ritual act of burning the picture of the Kitchen God who appeared to her to be a symbol of tyranny. In her imagination Wen Fu is linked to the Kitchen God. It is now time for Winnie, the Kitchen God’s wife, to forsake the familiar, oppressive Chinese male God and search for a new figure of a goddess who will be a symbol of happiness and hope for her daughter.

Winnie herself tells the Kitchen God’s story. A Chinese farmer named Zhang owed his prosperity to his good, hard-working wife named Guo. But Zhang, instead of remaining loyal to her brought a pretty, carefree woman named Lady Li. He made his wife Guo cook for Lady Li. Lady Li drove Guo out and squandered his riches. When Zhang was reduced to poverty, Lady Li ran away with another man.
Zhang, now a beggar, lay dying under the sky. Suddenly, he found himself in a kitchen. The girl tending the fire there explained that the kind-hearted lady of the house had taken pity on him, and brought him to her house. The lady was none other than his own good wife Guo. When he saw her walking into the room, Zhang, overwhelmed with a sense of shame, jumped into the roaring fire. Guo watched her husband's ashes fly into the heaven in three puffs of smoke. In heaven the Jade Emperor, being glad at his confession of guilt, made him Kitchen God, who would watch everybody's behaviour and report to the Emperor.

Winnie's own story is obviously developed on the outlines of the Kitchen God's story. Min, a woman whom Wen Fu brought temporarily to his house in China when Winnie was in the hospital, is like Lady Li. However, Wen Fu was never ashamed. Now in America, Winnie reviews her own past and that of her foremothers, and re-evaluates the role of the Kitchen God. She refuses to be judged by 'that kind of person' who cheated his wife. Winnie states that Kitchen God is not like Buddha or Kwan Yin, goddess of mercy; he has a status not even like the Money God. He is like a Store Manager, engaged in supervisory activities. In the ornate Chinese altar of Auntie Du bequeathed to Pearl, there is a picture of the Kitchen God who appears 'cartoon-like' to Winnie. "He has two long whiskers, shaped like smooth, tapered black whips" (KGW 53). There is, in the description of the picture, a dismissive humour ('cartoon-like'), a suggestion of oppressive male power ('whiskers like whips'), a power that is antithetical to that of Lord Buddha or Kwan Yin, both of whom represent kindness and mercy. He is, on the contrary, perceived as one like a "FBI agent, CIA, Mafia" (KGW 55). Winnie, therefore, rejects this god and wants to install a new goddess for her daughter. She finds a
'lady statue' with no name on the bottom of her chain. She will symbolise a new hope. Winnie calls this statue "Lady Sorrow free". She advises Pearl to take help from the new goddess – "She will wash everything sad with her tears" (KGW 414). This new goddess understands English, and therefore will be an appropriate one for the new generation of Chinese American daughters. This, Winnie feels, is the mother's legacy to her daughter, the mother helping her daughter in times of distress. In the last paragraph of the novel Winnie asks her daughter to help her light three sticks of incense that will symbolise a new beginning, a new hope. She says: "The smoke will take our wishes to heaven. Of course, it's only superstition, just for fun – oh, even faster when we laugh, lifting our hopes, higher and higher" (KGW 415).
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The “talk-story” is a Hawaiian pidgin phrase. Susan Brownmiller states that the phrase describes “the passing down of tales from the old generation to the young”. Chinese American women were in the habit of telling talk-stories which were a source of empowerment for women. See Susan Brownmiller, “Susan Brownmiller Talks with Maxine Hong Kingston, Author of The Woman Warrior”, in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*: A Casebook ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1999) 178.


5. Rabinowitz 179.


16. Fanon 31.

17. Manichaeism is a dualistic religious system based on the belief of everlasting conflict between good and evil, God and Satan, light and darkness. It has Christian, Gnostic and pagan elements in it.


19. Most of the Chinese people who ventured out to America did not settle there. They were repeatedly “out on the road”, an expression which was much in currency then. Most of these Chinese used to move between the USA and China. Driven by poverty in their own country and lured by job prospects in the “Gold Mountain”, these people left China for America in large numbers. They did all sorts of odd jobs in the new country – clearing forests, working in mines, laying railroads, sweating out days in sugarcane fields and so on. They were called ‘sojourners’ or ‘wandering sojourners’ whose dream it was to put in a few years of hard labour and to return to home wealthy and respected “Gold Mountain Guests”.


23. Cheung 84.

24. The wives of the Chinese sojourners or immigrants who were left behind in China were known as “Gold Mountain wives”. See note no.19 of this chapter.


28. Cheung, Silences 94.

29. Cheung, Silences 94.


31. Heung 612.


33. Xu 8.

34. Qtd. in Foster 209.

35. Qtd. in Heung 598-9.


37. Foster 217.