Introduction

This study of Maxine Hong Kingston is the outcome of my deep interest in the study of multi-ethnic literatures of America. As a student of American literature I have been following debates on the canon and observed the decentring of authoritative text, their replacement by comparatively less-known “marginalised” works and the inclusion of minority ethnic group in to the rubric of American studies. In particular I have been interested in the nuances of Asian voices in the American continent. Among the leading writers of the Asian-American canon, I would place Maxine Hong Kingston, whose *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) is a landmark in the salad-bowl of multi-ethnic literature.

A close study of *The Woman Warrior* made me curious about the background and history of immigrant communities in the promised land. The beginnings were not easy as I discovered from the accounts of Him Mark Lai, *et. al.'s Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island (1910-40)* (1980) and Elaine H. Kim’s *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982) on early Chinese immigration, but by dint of the perseverance and grit, the Chinese, like other immigrant communities, remained to stay. With time their voices came to be heard as one of the numerous heteroglottic notes of the American symphony.

In the present thesis my attempt is to study a few key issues like race, gender and autobiography against the historical and political background of the Chinese influx in to America. I focus on what may best be called the Chinatown sensibility of these immigrants and how it
is expressed through their literary works. My study, thus, is divided into four main divisions which critically analyse key issues in the making of Chinese-American literature. The first chapter surveys writers from this community who have fore-grounded the plight of the race that was earlier dismissed as “Chinks” and “Gooks.” It is in this literary tradition that Maxine Hong Kingston finds a place.

The two chapters that follow discuss how Maxine Hong Kingston, through her works like *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980), and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1990) takes up the main problems facing the Chinese-American community in America: racial discrimination, for instance, or the gender bias. The writer is doubly marginalized being, in the first place, in the minority community and, secondly, in the less privileged gender. Inspite of the double disadvantage, Kingston valiantly presents “a woman warrior,” symbolic of potentials that may be tapped despite marginalisation.

Kingston uses the autobiographical mode, as in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, but with a difference. She combines it with fantasy, folk-lore and history - personal and family history. So, what we have ultimately are the *memoirs* that are unique in the sense that it is also the record of a race, a community, a beleaguered set of people striving to come in to their own, seeking to be recognized as individuals. These are the various thrust areas of my dissertation.