INTRODUCTION
TOWARDS A FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY
Feminist historiography now implies in some sense a move towards the integrated domain of cultural history. …Historiography may be feminist without being, exclusively, women’s history. Such a historiography acknowledges that each aspect of reality is gendered, and is thus involved in questioning all that we think we know, in a sustained examination of analytical and epistemological apparatus, and in a dismantling of the ideological presuppositions of so called gender-neutral methodologies. A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be framed by a context, in order to be able to think of gender difference as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations. (Sangari & Vaid, 1986: 3)

This thesis explores the cross-cultural potential of fiction for demyhtifying the workings of patriarchies, and also for building up resistance against such power politics. I have studied three texts which depict myth as a site of cultural struggle, and bring into focus the ways in which women have been pushed to the fringes of society. Simultaneously, I analyse how fiction can reconstruct existing myths to restore to women the consequence that they have been denied so far.

Myths have been one of the most popular and effective strategies for constructing and upholding patriarchal systems. That is why, again and again, myths have been reiterated across time and culture to justify and strengthen the existing power structures, which are often referred to as ‘tradition’ or ‘reality’ or ‘history’. However, attempts have also been made to challenge patriarchal power and thereby the concepts like ‘reality’ or ‘history’, by rewriting those very myths – a process that can be analysed through literature.
I have selected three contemporary prose narratives – one each by Isabel Allende, Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison – all of which deploy myths. Apparently, these myths tell us three different tales in the context of the Spanish American, Indian and African American cultures, respectively. Nevertheless, a closer analysis reveals that basically all the three myths strive to rationalise and legitimise the existing power structures, be they related to colonial/imperial power, or power generated from one’s gender/class/racial position. In the texts that I have selected, Allende, Mahasweta and Morrison have reworked the respective myths, and through this reworking they draw attention to the process of mythification, stripping off the ‘spontaneous’ appearance of myths.

Patriarchy, as it is now well established, is not just a process of a man exploiting a woman. It is actually a network of various systems all of which work together to perpetuate the status quo. (Bhasin, 1993; Geetha, 2002; Sangari, 2008; Sangari & Vaid, 1991). Such systems include institutions like education, family, marriage, religion, law, state, ‘prostitution’ and mass media; beliefs in certain ‘customs’, ‘traditions’ and so on and so forth:

Those who address male control over reproduction introduced a new concept: patriarchy, or rule by the father. Patriarchy was seen as a system which existed alongside systems of economic exploitation, organizing male control over female sexuality and the sphere of reproduction. The exchange of women, abduction and rape were viewed as salient aspects of patriarchy, as so many means through which female sexuality was sought to be controlled. This control was exercised in the interest of male power and
gradually institutionalized at several levels: work, culture, custom, religion, education. (Geetha, 2002: 65)

The list of such institutions and beliefs is potentially endless. These institutions and beliefs are strengthened through a number of ideologies, which in turn, are generated by these institutions and beliefs. (Sangari & Vaid, 1991) Myths and folktales have been among the most popular methods, across time and cultures, to generate and strengthen such ideologies and beliefs. Thus patriarchy maintains itself through such apparently neutral institutions and belief systems. This thesis studies three feminist texts to explore how such ‘neutral’ systems like myths, have contributed in upholding patriarchies across the world.

Feminist Historiography:

The famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy rests on the central concept of ‘humanisation’ which can become very useful in the context of de-mythifying patriarchies. Freire argues that “the ontological and historical vocation” of human beings is to become “more fully human” (1973: 52). Following this concept of humanisation¹, it can be said that sets of ideologies, institutions and belief systems have been created to establish and ensure men’s control over women; a process that have

¹ As an educator Freire’s main concern was to create a pedagogy that would help in the process of humanisation. The concept, however, can be very useful in the context of feminism. For details on Freirean pedagogy, see Freire (1973, 1998).
actually turned both men and women into dehumanised beings. Their struggle to become “more fully human” stems from the consciousness of their dehumanised state. Feminism supports this attempt at humanisation by pointing out the factors that prevent women from being humanised, thus helping in deconstructing the existing power structure, and reconstructing an egalitarian society.

Attempts have been made almost all over the world, to conceal or camouflage women’s consciousness of their exploitation that has existed since time immemorial. Glorification of motherhood and keeping women engaged with children and other household chores, keeping them illiterate, men’s control over women’s body/sexuality and also their intellect/psyche are some of the major strategies deployed throughout the ages in almost every country including India and the Americas to dominate women. These are some of the common problems that many women – irrespective of their diverse identities based on their larger and immediate social position, for instance, class, caste, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and so on and so forth – have faced and are facing.

However, feminism as an organised movement has often prioritised the position of ‘white’, ‘upper’ class women and generalised their socio-political locus, thereby...

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2 For a long time, feminist movement was largely related to women’s suffrage movement. After the First World War, when most of the countries recognised women’s right to vote, the feminist movement began to address other issues related to women. This feminism, mainly a critique of gender inequality, was often called as the first wave of feminism. The second wave of feminism, which started during 1960s mainly in North America and Britain, focused on patriarchal control of women’s mind and body, equal wages for men and women in work place etc. The problem with both these two types was that they talked only about ‘western’, ‘white’, ‘middle-class’ women. To a certain extent they were related to certain political movements, but only as far as the interest of this particular type of women were concerned. These feminisms never bothered about the ‘marginalized’, ‘lower class’, ‘black’ women; and therefore, rape of a ‘black’ or ‘marginalized’ woman by a ‘white’ man could be easily ignored by such feminisms. (Kaplan, 1991). They also ignored the question of caste which was an inextricable part of gender struggle in India. The ‘marginalized’ women of any ‘marginalized’ country need a movement, which will address their own problems, and these problems are something more than mere sexual egalitarianism.
ignoring multiple identities of women.\(^3\) (Castillo, 1992; Alcoff & Mendieta, 2003). Non-western women have therefore, established their own critiques of several modes of patriarchal exploitations specific to their contexts, which has eventually resulted in the

\(^3\) How the ‘western’ feminism can become completely out of place in certain situations can be explained through one example each from the context of India, Latin America and African America.

\(a.\) In an article called ‘Atmakatha: amar jibon’ (My Stories: My Life) Chuni Kotal, a dalit woman of ‘lodha’ community – one of the various untouchable communities of India – narrates her life-story:

At that time a few of us lodha children used to go to school. But our teacher did not like that. …If we came out of the classroom keeping our books there, their children (‘upper’ class children) used to tear our books. If we complained to the teacher he used to beat us and the students found the courage to harass us. Despite all these tortures if somebody continued studying, that student was never been promoted from class I to class II. After being disqualified for several years, that person was forced to leave the school. After that, they were seen on the fields with sticks in their hand, grazing other’s cows… Now I am jobless. Even after studying despite all these difficulties, I could not find a line. In spite of such poverty I have spend a lot of money on postal orders and registry. I have heard that there are reservations for caste and tribes. I don’t know who work on those seats. (Kotal, 2005: 133-135) [translation mine]

This is how Chuni Kotal, the first woman graduate of the ‘lodha’ community retrospects her life. She was also a student of Vidyasagar University. Finally, this woman committed suicide in 1992.

\(b.\) In a Tribuna del Año Internacional de la Mujer (Steering Committee of the International Year of the Woman) Domitila Barrios de Chungara, the wife of a Bolivian mine worker, said to the Mexican delegation:

Señora, I have known you for a week. Every morning you show up in a different outfit and on the other hand, I don’t. Every day you show up all made up and combed like someone who has time to spend in an elegant beauty parlor and who can spend money on that, and yet I don’t. I see that each afternoon you have a chauffeur in a car waiting at the door of this place to take you home, and yet I don’t. I’m sure you live in a really elegant home, in an elegant neighbourhood, no? and yet we miners’ wives only have a small house on loan to us, and when our husbands die or get sick or are fired from the company, we have ninety days to leave the house and then we’re in the street.

Now, señora, tell me: is your situation at all similar to mine? Is my situation at all similar to yours? So what equality are we going to speak of between the two of us? If you and I aren’t alike, if you and I are so different? We can’t, at this moment, be equal, even as women… (Barrios de Chungara, 1978: 202)

\(c.\) Kimberle Crenshaw, while discussing political intersectionalities in rape, draws attention to racial discriminations:

A study of rape dispositions in Dallas, for example, showed that the average prison term for a man convicted of raping a black woman was two years, as compared to five years for the rape of a Latina and ten years for the rape of a white woman. A related issue is the fact that African-American victims of rape are the least likely to be believed. The Dallas study and other like it also point to a more subtle problem: neither the antirape nor the antiracist political agenda has focused on the black rape victim. (Mendieta & Alcoff, 2004: 185)
creation of several schools of feminism. To be humanised, a non-‘white’, ‘lower’ class woman has to fight against patriarchal exploitations as well as ‘white’, ‘western’ feminism, which, hand in hand with other forms of power, has helped in silencing the voices of non-‘white’, ‘lower’ class women. Thus for a non-‘white’, ‘lower’ class woman, gender struggle cannot exist in isolation, it is a part of racial and class struggle.

The ‘powerless’ group – irrespective of their skin-colour and ethnicity – have, therefore, forged their own methods of struggle in the realms of myths, folktales and literatures. Being deprived of the privilege of literacy, for a long time women were unable to construct an alternate version of History. Nevertheless, they recorded their lived realities in oral stories, myths and legends; and later in their diaries, letters, biographies, and sometimes through novels and stories.

Fiction:

In his ‘Discourse in the Novel’, Mikhail Bakhtin explores the coexistence of various voices within a particular sentence, a phenomenon that he calls heteroglossia (2004). Bakhtin asserts that any language bears within itself various voices, like professional jargons, social dialects, peer group dialects, ‘trendy’ dialects etc. The novel, according to Bakhtin, has the potential to bring into play a variety of voices within a language. The novel or fiction, in fact, has the capacity to represent not only a single view-point, but also a dialogue between various view-points. It is this unique feature that

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4 For a concise discussion on various schools of feminisms, see Andermahr, Lovell & Wolkowitz, (2000).
makes it different from history or political speech. Thus the form of a work of fiction – including its use of multiple voices or modes, and of course, language – is an integral part of it, intertwined with and complementary to its content. Reading the form and content together can reveal how history is thematized in fiction.

Due to such features of the incorporation of various voices, literature, even when written, can preserve some characteristics of oral speech. In fact, orality plays a very important role in the cultures of India and Americas. As oral culture needs to be memorised in order to be transmitted, memory also becomes very important in any oral culture. Thus literature in general, can be regarded as a codification of memory/reality/history.

History has generally been defined as a record or account of past events, or larger time (Dasgupta, 1998), as an “absent cause” available to us only “in textual form” (Jameson, 2002: 20). However, as this record or textualization has always been made by the ‘powerful’ group(s) of the society, it generally reflects their point of views. Such versions of history focus exclusively on the larger time and create a men-centric world

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5 The English word ‘literature’ derives from the Latin root ‘litera’ meaning ‘a letter’. ‘Literature’ is generally defined as the art of composition in prose or verse. The Bangla synonym of ‘literature’ is ‘sahitya’, which derives from the Sanskrit word ‘sahitya’ meaning “association, connection, society, combination, union with, agreement, harmony, rhetorical composition, poetry” etc. (Monier-Williams, 2004). It shows clearly that the connotations of the terms like ‘history’ and ‘literature’ were different in the three cultures that in this thesis I am concerned with. In ancient India they were not treated as two different subjects. Unlike ‘literature’, ‘sahitya’ was never essentially connected to anything written. Bharata’s Natyasastra speaks about two kinds of ‘kavya’ [literally means that which is “endowed with the qualities of a sage or poet, descended or coming from a sage, prophetic, inspired, poetical.” (Monier-Williams, 2004)] – sravyakavya or aural kavya and drsyakavya or visual kavya. Meaning, knowledge was transacted mainly through oral or visual means. The Vedas were also recited and remembered. A similar connection between history and literature is found in Latin America and Africa as well. Most of the indigenous communities of ancient Latin America and Africa did not have any written script. In Africa a very rich tradition of ‘orature’ is found as opposed to the idea of ‘literature’. The earlier generations of African-Americans’ knowledge of Africa, which they regarded as their own country, was acquired mainly through the oral tales and songs they heard from their ancestors. The earliest extant text of the Mayas, Popul Vuh, has survived mainly in people’s memory. The stories of this book can be interpreted as simple tales as well as history of the Mayas.
which either excludes women – or personal time (Dasgupta, 1998) – completely from its purview or shows them as derogatory/inferior to men. Thus men have constructed a world projecting themselves as binary opposite to women. Literature has the scope to focus on the personal elements, as opposed to the larger history – “…literature was one of the few public discourses in which women were allowed to speak themselves, where they were not the imaginary representations of men.” (Kaplan, 1991: 161). Besides, as Bakhtin (2004) has explained, it also has the scope to establish a dialogue between various versions of an event.

However, men’s attempt to deny the importance of women in society has resulted in the belittling of the importance of literature as a discipline. This is also an attempt to deny the power that literature has to incorporate various, and sometimes, contradictory voices, for such an inclusive world is a threat to the exclusive world that acknowledges only one voice and version as absolute.\(^6\) Notwithstanding such attempts at belittling literature, it still remains one of those few means that allows women to speak for themselves, and above all, which can incorporate a dialogue between various view points. As a codification of history,\(^7\) it also provides the scope to deconstruct the constructed history and reconstruct it from new/different perspectives.

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\(^6\) For similar reasons, most of the oral traditions of India, Latin America and Africa have later been regarded as myths. These traditions have come down to us not directly from the ancient population but through the colonisers. It is the colonisers who have recorded this history, and while writing have distorted the history according to their own interest. Or, to put it in a different way, the colonisers have ‘mythified’ the past of their colonies in such a way that would serve their purpose, because this is how colonialism works. Not only does it manipulate the present of the colony but also distorts and disfigures its past. (Anderson, 1987) This amnesia helps the colonisers to manipulate the colonies more effectively by convincing the colonised people about their evangelical motive. This is one practical example of ‘mythification’ of reality.

\(^7\) In fact, this interaction between history and literature is an age-old phenomenon. The Sanskrit word ‘itihasa’ – which is nowadays used as a synonym of the English word ‘history’—literally means ‘so indeed
This history, however, is not a record of larger time, but that of personal time; a lived history of women. The three narratives by Isabel Allende, Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison depict this lived history through reworking a legend, a religious myth and a folk myth, respectively. The authors allude to or explore in detail the process of mythification, drawing attention to the ways in which histories, ‘mainstream’ and popular alike, exclude women from their purview.

Myths and Mythification:

The English word ‘myth’ derives from the Greek word ‘mythos’ which etymologically means speech or story. However, today what is meant by the term myth is not mere speech. Myth has generally been defined as a story which is part of a mythology. It generally incorporates supernatural beings and is believed to be “true”:

In its primary significance a myth is one story in a mythology, or system of narratives, which were once widely believed to be true, and which served to explain, in terms of the intentions and actions of the supernatural beings, why the world is what it is and why things happen as they do. (Abrams, Norton, & Rushton, 1960: 54)

_It was_ (iti-ha-asa). The two most popular ancient Indian texts, _The Ramayana_ and _The Mahabharata_ are also called ‘itihasa’. The Spanish word ‘historia’ also means “estudio del pasado” or study of the past and “narración” or story or tale. The English word ‘history’ derives from the Greek root ‘histor’ means knowing. Incidentally, the Spanish word also derives from the same root. But English ‘history’ is generally defined only as an account or record of past events.
Hans Blumenberg, however, highlights the duality of myths in being consistent in overall structure, yet varying in minute details:

Myths are stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation. (Blumenberg, 1985: 37)

While Blumenberg agrees that these stories are not simply a product of imagination, he does not talk about mythification as such. By acknowledging that myths are actually representations of people’s thought Burridge alludes to the process of making of myths:

Myths are reservoirs of articulate thought on the level of the collective. But they are not simply “articulate thought” in a vacuum. They represent the thought of people about themselves and their condition. Moreover, the words of myth, especially when set down in writing, appear to have an ‘objective’ existence irrespective of the attitudes and approaches of the narrator, listeners or observer. (Burridge, 2004: 92)

A comparison between the mythic and the linguistic system of signification can illuminate the myth-making process in further details. According to the structuralists (Saussure, Bally, Sechehaye, Harris, Riedlinger, 1986; Hjelmslev, 1969), language is a sign constituted by a signifier and a signified. The signifier or the sound connotes the signified or the concept. Structuralists have shown that this system of signification is not pre-given. It depends upon a particular culture and time. One particular signifier or sound
can connote two different signifieds or concepts in two different cultures. Similarly, various sounds can be used in various language systems in order to connote the same concept.

Lévi-Strauss points out the similarity between the linguistic and mythic systems of signification, “…myth is language: to be known myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech.” (1955: 52). Therefore, myth can be explained through Saussure’s concepts of langue and parole. Langue, in case of myth refers to the structural aspect, that is, the structural similarity found among different myths from different places and time; and parole refers to the general system of myth. Starting with this Saussurian model, Lévi-Strauss argues that myth actually operates on a different level, where the properties of langue and parole are combined together:

…myth uses a third referent which combines the properties of the first two. On the one hand, a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages – anyway, long ago. But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future. (1955: 52)

Therefore, Lévi-Strauss places myth “above the ordinary linguistic level” (53), which functions “on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at “taking off” from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling.” (1955: 52-53). Meaning, that which is known as sign in the linguistic system is considered as a signifier in the mythic system of signification. Margaret Hiley (2004) has explained this structure in the following way:
That which is known as sign ($S_1$) in the linguistic system of signification, becomes a signifier in the mythic system of signification. This signifier, with its own signified or concept, creates the sign ($S_2$) in the mythic system of signification. $S_1$ and $S_2$ are not identical, but the signification of $S_2$ depends on $S_1$. That is, in order to understand the meaning of a myth it is necessary to know the meaning of the language, but the latter is not the determining factor for the former.

Hence, Levi-Strauss claims myths to be more translatable than poetry, for in case of the former, language is not that important. The value of a myth lies not in its language, but in its story or content:

Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions; whereas the mythical value of myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation. Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader throughout the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original
music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells. (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 52)

However, the transformation from $S_1$ to $S_2$ is so subtle that generally it remains unnoticed, concealing the palimpsests of agencies that influence this process of transformation:

This is the great distortion of myth: that it disguises itself as an inductive system, when it is in fact a semiological one; the reader, instead of recognising the arbitrary connection between signifier and signified, believes there to be a natural relationship between them. This appearance of naturalness justifies myth’s claim to timelessness and universality. (Hiley, 2004: 841)

Laurence Coupe (1997) has analysed the five-staged process of myth-making revealing the transformation from $S_1$ to $S_2$. The first stage is the ‘happening’ stage where some “material operation” (7) is performed. In the second stage, that action is completed; which is coloured with symbols and imageries in the third stage. In the fourth stage this tale is disseminated widely mainly through oral mode. Coupe views this process as an attempt to conserve the myth. If it is preserved successfully, then in the fifth stage, people – apparently, distant in time and space from the “material operation” – take the myth as True. Thus mythification of the real incident, the transformation from $S_1$ to $S_2$, is concealed completely.

While analysing the Canadian myth of Asdiwal, Lévi-Strauss (1967) has explicated the four different levels on which myths evolve. Firstly, he mentions the geographical level, including physical as well as political geography. Secondly, the
economic level, that is, the economic life of the people related to the myth. Thirdly, he stresses on the sociological level, and finally, the cosmological level, which seals the veracity of a myth.

However, it is necessary to note the difference between mythification and mythopoeia. In literature, the process of myth-making is generally known by the term ‘mythopoeia’. Cuddon defines mythopoeia as – “The conscious creation of a myth. In literature, the appropriation and reworking of mythical material, or the creation of a kind of ‘private’ mythology.” (1991: 563). It should be noted that by mythification I am not referring to mythopoeia. None of the fictions that I shall be dealing with in this thesis consciously *creates* a myth. While reworking existing myths from feminist perspectives, they actually reveal the process of mythmaking. It is due to this reason that the notion of “timelessness” generally associated with myth is not found in any of these texts. On the contrary, all these three authors have tried to situate their texts in particular time and place. By challenging the notion of “timelessness” the authors’ effort to subvert the already existing myths becomes prominent. All these authors deal with certain myths constructed in and by a hierarchical society. The process of mythification actually involves a complex power play, depending on who are creating these myths, as any retelling/rewriting/re-presentation of any ‘real’ incident is subjective, and depends on the narrator’s position/identity/interest etc. Therefore, the myths created in and by a hierarchical society will naturally, try to explain “why the world is what it is and why things happen as they do.” (Abrams, Norton & Rushton, 1960: 54) That is, myths created by the ‘powerful’ will usually justify a hierarchy, and myths created by the ‘powerless’
elaborates modes of subverting the existing hierarchy. In fact, the choice of the incident to be mythified also depends on these factors.

In this thesis I shall refer to certain allegedly real incidents generally known as ‘legends’, and folktales that have attained the status of myth. When I refer to those legends and folktales as myth, I mean that their meaning is no longer confined to the linguistic system of signification. They have acquired a different meaning in the mythic system of signification. For instance, the linguistic sign ‘Joaquín Murieta’ no longer refers simply to the concept of a man named Joaquín Murieta, but a man who fought for his compatriots, who protested against class and racial exploitations.

The narratives I have selected are based on three different myths –the Joaquín Murieta myth from the Spanish-American, the sati myth from the Indian and the tar baby myth from the African American context. All these myths are very popular, and have been used as recurrent themes across time and genre, in the respective cultural contexts. Such recurrent use of these myths has a dual significance. On the one hand it depicts the popularity and importance of the myths in their respective cultures. On the other hand, it draws attention to intertextuality, revealing the fabrication of a myth:

Intertextuality suggests that a text is not a self-contained unit and obliges one to consider the special referentiality of literary works; it is thus an appropriate theoretical framework for analysing a historical figure and a historical event that have entered the discursive space of a culture, while the present image becomes intelligible only in terms of prior discourse. (Cypress, 1991: 5)
These myths have various versions which vary from region to region. The texts I shall analyse often allude to more than one version of a myth, which actually helps in the deconstruction of the mythmaking process.

At this point it is imperative to consider the politics of cultural relativism and that of patriarchy. When a few ‘civilised’ nations of the world went in search of cheap raw-materials for their industries and markets for their finished products; it became part of their project to portray the ‘other’ nations as ‘uncivilised’ so as to confer to themselves the evangelical burden of ‘civilising’ the ‘other’. Consciously and deliberately they tried to impose their culture and traditions on the other countries, by marginalising the Others’ cultures and traditions. As a reaction to this cultural hegemony, there emerged a notion of cultural relativism which claimed to understand each culture and tradition in its own context. That is, the theory of cultural relativism does not evaluate one culture with the axes of another. However, it is also important to note that cultural relativism, despite the fact that it tries to respect the individuality of each and every culture, is essentially based on the distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, on the assumption that ‘they’ are different from ‘us’. Thus the theory actually essentialises the difference between the self and the other, projecting this difference as a non-negotiable site. Satya Mohanty (1997) criticises the theory of cultural relativism saying that, in privileging difference thus, it hinders a healthy dialogue between various cultures. He suggests that one should search for some common spaces to facilitate a dialogue. And the common spaces can be found by historicising cultural practices, texts, languages etc., which would reveal the commonality, irrespective of the differences:
“They” ultimately do what “we” do, since they share with us a capacity for self-aware historical agency. If their terms, categories, and solutions are fundamentally different from ours, we have identified not merely a difference but what Charles Taylor calls an “incommensurability”. Incommensurable activities are different, according to Taylor’s useful distinction, but “they somehow occupy the same space.” (140)

The myths of Joaquín Murieta, sati and the tar baby, taken from three different cultural and linguistic contexts, might seem incommensurable, nevertheless a thorough analysis brings into attention the exact ways in which they “occupy the same space.” To this extent, myths, legends and folktales can facilitate dialogues between cultures, and thus contribute in the construction of a feminist historiography.

Exploring the processes of mythification and de-mythification in the context of three different cultures, this project seeks to understand the functioning of patriarchy in these cultural contexts. Comparing and contrasting three cultural contexts helps in recognising the similarities in patterns of patriarchies all over the world; and simultaneously reveals the commonalities in the nature of resistance against patriarchal power, as inscribed in these texts.

However, like any other research work, this thesis has its own limitations. A major limitation is that although it deals with three myths, the focus is still on certain particular aspects of mythification. That is to say, it concentrates on aspects of mythification as depicted in the texts. For instance, while discussing the mythification of the Murieta myth, I elaborate Allende’s depiction of mythification of the Murieta myth.
Nevertheless, due to constraints of time and space I cannot explicate mythifications of the same myth by other authors, although I make some elementary references. Similarly in cases of the sati and the tar baby myth, I stress on the specific authors I am considering, and not on other authors.

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The following chapters study the texts by Isabel Allende, Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison respectively, to explore how they engage with popular myths to demythify patriarchal power, and how they reconstruct the myths, and thereby the given world, from a feminist perspective.

Although Allende, Mahasweta and Morrison are very popular authors, still the texts I have selected are not among the most popular texts by these authors. For some reason or other, these texts, to a large extent, have been unable to attract the attention of literary scholars. I have not, for instance, been able to locate any analysis of Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Maina sati athoba ekti aloukik kahini’, or ‘Maina Sati or a Supernatural Story’. Allende’s *Hija de la fortuna* or *Daughter of Fortune*, on the other hand, have been camouflaged under her more popular works, especially her first novel *La casa de los espíritus* or *The House of the Spirits. Morrison’s* *Tar Baby* has been regarded as “failure”
(Coleman 1986) illustrating yet another aspect of popular reception. The present thesis chooses these less-‘popular’ works of ‘popular’ authors to show how the authors undermine certain ‘popular’ notions, and thereby, the very concept of ‘popularity’.

The first chapter analyses Isabel Allende’s (b.1942) *Hija de la fortuna* or *Daughter of Fortune* and her ways of de-mythifying the myth of Joaquín Murieta in the context of mid-nineteenth century California. Joaquín Murieta was, supposedly, one of the numerous Latin Americans who went to California in search of gold during late 1840s; and then became a ‘Robin Hood’ hero. Having spent her childhood in Chile and later life in California, Allende is familiar to various versions of this myth. The chapter analyses the evolution of the Murieta myth synchronically and diachronically, to trace how Allende undermines this popular myth, and actually tells the tale of a first generation Latina in the United States of America. After the publication of *Hija* in 1999, a number of review essays were published in various journals and newspapers. Almost all these reviews praise *Hija* as a wonderful novel which retells history (Sheppard, 1999), and which narrates a woman’s search for freedom (Arrington, 2000). Nevertheless most of these reviews completely ignore the character of Andieta and also the Andieta-Murieta ambiguity. Celia Novella (1999) is the only person who has alluded to this aspect of the novel. Yanira Paz (2005) wrote a brief comparison of the two sagas of Joaquin Murieta; that is, a comparison of Pablo Neruda’s *Fulgor y muerte de Joaquin Murieta* (*Splendour and Death of Joaquin Murieta*) and Allende’s *Hija*. Paz views Neruda’s Murieta as a typical epic hero while Allende’s Murieta as an anti-hero. However, she does not explain the Murieta-Andieta ambiguity, which is a key point of approach for my thesis. Allende

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8 Henceforth referred as *Hija*. 
could have mentioned the name of Joaquin Murieta if she were to have written a “historical romance”; or could have restrained herself simply to the level of Andieta to write a memoir or picaresque narrative. She, however, has done neither. Instead, her novel deliberately foregrounds an ambiguity that I believe, has a purpose of its own, which the chapter explains.

The second chapter studies the myth of sati in the context of Mahasweta Devi’s (b.1926) ‘Maina sati athoba ekhi aloukik kahini’ or Maina sati or a supernatural story. Concentrating on a real incident, the immolation of a young widow named Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan in 1987, this chapter explores the evolution of the myth of sati, and analyses how Mahasweta de-mythifies this popular myth through her story. The story can be read as a result of Mahasweta’s prolonged engagement with numerous social activities, which she prioritises over her writings. Various scholars (Mani, 1998; Mukhopadhyay, 1957; Sangari and Vaid, 1981, 1991; Sangari, 2008; Stein, 1978; Sundar Rajan, 1993) have drawn attention to sexual violence like widow immolation in the name of a ‘religious custom’. I have analysed Mahasweta’s story in the light of these works, especially in relation to the works of Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid on widow immolation and sexual violence.

The third chapter concentrates on Toni Morrison’s (b.1931) Tar Baby to explore how she reverses the age old folk myth of the tar baby to depict the struggle of an African American woman in the context of twentieth century United States of America. There are

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9 Henceforth referred as ‘Maina sati’.
10 All the English translations of Castellano and Bangla texts – wherever the name of the translator is not mentioned – are mine.
a number of works (Paquet, 1990; Bennett, 2001; Walther, 1990; Coleman, 1986; Duvall, 1997; Hawthorne, 1988; Guerrero, 1990; House, 1984) on Morrison’s *Tar Baby*. Most of them, however, concentrate on Morrison’s portrayal of African elements in the novel, but not on the African-AmeriCannes, which is my major entry-point to this text. Taking my cue from Morrison’s own African American identity, I have explored how through the use of this element Morrison actually turned the age-old myth upside down.

The fourth, and the last, chapter underscores certain critical insights on (de)mythification and feminist historiography drawn from the detailed analysis of these three texts, and explores how ‘fiction as feminist historiography’ can be used as an analytical category in the de-mythification of patriarchal frameworks and in the reconstruction of feminist scholarship.