CHAPTER 4
FROM MYTH TO FICTION: FEMINIST

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND (DE)MYTHIFICATION
Any study of ‘alternatives’ is essentially non-teleological as the possibility of ‘alternatives’ is potentially endless. Implicit in the idea of this project being a search for feminist – that is to say an alternate – historiography, is that it cannot end with a conventional ‘conclusion’; for a conclusion will put a stop to the potential emergence of alternatives. Rather than posit a teleological alternative as a ‘conclusion’ then, this last chapter highlights certain critical insights into feminist historiography and de-mythification as obtained from the study of *Hija*, ‘Maina sati’ and *Tar Baby*.

Fiction conceived as feminist historiography has the power to reveal the process of mythification and bring into attention the role that various patriarchal ideologies and institutions play in that process. Through deft use of language, similes, metaphors, heteroglossia and such other narrative techniques, fiction can actually show the conflict of various view points during the process of conversion of a linguistic sign into a mythic sign, and can thereby explore the role that various ideologies and institutions play in the process of mythification. Allende, Mahasweta and Morrison have all used such techniques to explore the process of mythification and to de-mythify the existing myths of Joaquín Murieta, sati and the tar baby, respectively. Myths serve as an effective way to uphold and exercise the power that can be derived from one’s sexual/class/ethnic identity, by privileging a particular sex and class/ethnicity over another.

These three fictions lay bare the patriarchal network by unravelling the process of mythification and by reconstructing those very myths from a feminist perspective. Considering these fictions as feminist historiography, this thesis underscores how such
ficitions reveal, on the one hand, the workings of gender politics in denying women any consequence in society; and on the other hand, the importance of women in the functioning of any social system.

A study of *Hija*, ‘Maina sati’ and *Tar Baby* depicts how the seemingly ‘spontaneous’ process of mythification is thoroughly manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, by the ‘powerful’ group(s). The definition of this ‘power’, of course, varies according to the cultural context. Nonetheless, the three texts illustrate how sexual identity is one of the major sources of ‘power’ in this world – at least, in India and in the Americas – that affects all other power-relations, including the processes of gendering, sexual violence and cultural imperialism. The popular myths of Joaquín Murieta, sati and the tar baby clearly show how myths can be tailored by male power, be it in the name of national identity as happened in case of Murieta and the sati myth, or ethnic identity as exemplified through the tar baby myth. While the Joaquín Murieta and the tar baby myths marginalise women by excluding them, the sati myth glorifies women in order to facilitate their exploitations. The exclusion and glorification, both serve patriarchy by keeping women out of the “men’s sphere”. Thus patriarchal power places women at the centre/margin and utilises them at its own convenience.

The power of narrative strategy also provides fiction with the scope to reconstruct feminist scholarship by reworking existing myths, as Allende, Mahasweta and Morrison have done in these texts. Firstly, the authors demystify the mythmaking process to expose the vigilant role of various ideologies and institutions – for instance, the role of family in
Hiya, of religion in ‘Maina sati’ and of racial patriarchies in Tar baby – in monitoring the demeanour of women. Secondly, they rework – in different ways – those very myths to challenge the dominant ideologies and institutions. The myths of Joaquín Murieta, sati and the tar baby set in distinct contexts illustrate the varied methods of reconstruction of myths. Allende, for instance, chooses to highlight the so-far neglected character of Rosita to bring out the important role that women have played in society. In a way, she reverses the Murieta myth by projecting Andieta as an unsuccessful person and Eliza as a successful one. While Andieta fails to achieve his dream of establishing a democratic and egalitarian world, Eliza, almost unconsciously, helps people overcome the routine exploitations and despair of life. The qualitative difference between what Eliza finally achieves and what Andieta wanted to achieve, draws attention to the distinct nature of their methodologies. Eliza’s success foregrounds the importance of one-to-one relationship as opposed to Andieta’s mass-campaigning. While the latter suppresses individuality under the abstract identity of ‘the masses’, the former essentially underscores individuality and individual identity. The one-to-one relationship therefore, has wider scope to include the varied lived history of women,¹ which the mass-campaigning tend to ignore. As Gilligan (1982) points out, women’s nurturing processes make them conscious about the Other’s individuality and teaches them to respect that.

Human relationships become very significant in ‘Maina sati’ and Tar Baby as well. Karali, who conceived the entire plan of murdering Madhumati and Maina, never shared his designs with anyone else. He preferred to operate alone so as not to share his

¹ It is due this reason that diaries, autobiographies and testimonios have generally been considered as ‘feminist genres’. However, this thesis examines the exact ways in which fiction can capture, with even grater details, the lived reality.
wealth; whereas Madhumati had the power to establish new relationships, to hold a family together. Jadine, despite her ‘Americanness’, imbibes the strength of the Africans. By projecting Jadine as a living tar baby Morrison underscores her ability to adhere to people/culture. Like Eliza, Madhumati and Jadine also care for ‘others’, once again highlighting care as a feminist trait. By portraying Jadine as the modern African American woman, Morrison challenges the ‘traditional’ definition of Africanness. Morrison’s stress on Jadine’s Africanness in spite of her pronounced Americanness that sets her apart from the ‘traditional’ Black women, actually calls for a redefinition of the ‘traditional’ concept of Africanness. Jadine shows the necessity of such a redefinition in order to be able to survive in the modern world. Mahasweta Devi, however, does not reconstruct the ‘sati’ myth as such. Through her exploration of the process of mythification, she reveals the role of religion, an apparently ‘neutral’ institution, in exploiting women. By pointing out the fabricated nature of these ‘spontaneous’ methods of exploitation, Mahasweta unmask various facets of patriarchies, and shows how patriarchies work under various guises. Thus Mahasweta contributes in reconstructing feminist scholarship.

The crucial role of these institutions and ideologies in mythification comes to the forefront when we find that the authors’ refusal to accept their hegemonic power in the mythmaking process can actually turn the significance of the existing myths upside down. Eliza therefore, defies the very definition of family by including non-kin members into her family. The new family, then, is more inclusive and based not simply on pre-given kinship, but on human beings’ willingness to live as a clan. The willingness and
necessity to live in a cluster augments human responsibility and helps to overcome constructed discrepancies like gender, class, caste etc. The life and death of Madhumati brings to the forefront the flaws of institutionalised religion. Mahasweta’s story highlights the failure of religion as an institution to unite people, and depicts how this institution has actually become one of the various tools of exploitations. As a tool of exploitation, religion has wider scope to exert power and manipulate simultaneously at the levels of gender, class and caste. Jadine challenges the ethnic identity of a ‘black’ woman by refusing to define herself as a ‘traditional’ Black woman. For ‘traditional’ ‘black’ people, to challenge certain gender roles is to challenge their own ethnic identity. Jadine however, demonstrates the courage to challenge these gender roles – like cooking and producing children – and thereby her ethnic identity, and by doing so she actually foregrounds the difference between gender roles and ethnic identity. Thus, challenging the very concepts of national/ethnic identity enables the author to overturn the existing myths, and in turn the dominant patriarchal significations too.

The fact that myths are generally oral by nature of communication facilitates the concealment of the process of their construction. This concealment takes place primarily through veiling of the identity of the ‘author’. In addition, orality simultaneously increases the velocity and accessibility of a myth. Hence, rumour plays a very important role in myth-making. Fiction, in spite of its written nature, has the scope to deploy oral strategies in revealing the process of (de)mythification. Due to its heteroglossic nature, fiction can include several voices simultaneously, including the voices of women. Thus fiction helps in breaking the long-standing culture of silence and constructing a feminist
historiography. Woman’s voice is manifested in the texts not only through the major protagonists, but also through the narrator’s voice itself. Jadine, for instance, is one of most vocal characters of the novel who speaks for herself. Allende expresses women’s voices through Eliza as well as other minor characters like Joe Rompehuesos or Paulina del Valle. Madhumati, however, is quite a passive character compared to Jadine and Eliza. It is the narrator’s voice that turns Madhumati’s pregnant silence into a screaming satire.

Challenging the veracity of written documents, such as newspaper reports, actually helps in foregrounding the feminist perspective which has scarcely found any place in the documented history, and has survived mainly through oral discourses. In fact, there is a close interaction between oral and written cultures in these stories. The texts draw on oral culture in order to depict the unmediated and lived reality of women. This is evident in their languages, as well as through the presence of various voices in their writings. Although Hija, ‘Maina sati’ and Tar Baby are narrated by third person omniscient narrators, the shift in each narrator’s tone is still evident. While the presence of heteroglossia is more frequent in Mahasweta and Morrison, Allende uses mainly letters and diaries – two of those very few modes of unmediated documentation available to women – to cause a change in the narrator’s voice. However, she explores the role of rumour and orality through the third person narrator’s voice, particularly by highlighting the relationship between rumour and newspapers. The latter has also been explored in Mahasweta’s story, and to this extent, both the stories actually challenge the reliability of newspaper reports, that is to say, reliability of written documents.
Documented history of nations has not only left out women’s voices from its purview, but has also shaped women in accordance with its own needs. Such history mingles up the concept of ‘good’/ ‘bad’ woman with her national/ethnic identity. A ‘good’ Chilean/Indian/Black woman therefore, is supposed to conduct herself in certain particular ways, and any deviation from those ‘norms’ can make her national/ethnic identity susceptible. Accordingly, a woman who immolates herself upholds the ‘glorious’ Indian tradition and becomes the ‘ideal’ Indian woman. Eliza cannot return to Chile as she has deviated from the norms of a ‘good’ Chilena. Jadine’s relatives and other Black people question her ‘black’ identity because her way of living is different from traditional ‘black’ women in many aspects. A pondering point here is, however relative the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ may be, a common characteristic is that women’s ‘goodness’ depends on their ability to conform to the existing social structure. While de-mythifying the myths of Murieta, ‘sati’ and the tar baby; Eliza, Madhumati and Jadine also strive to differentiate between their sexual and national/ethnic identity.

As an attempt to challenge official history, ‘fiction as feminist historiography’ emphasizes memory as opposed to recorded accounts. The conflict between remembered and recorded accounts of events is manifested in these texts through their narrative technique. While Allende uses multiple narrative voices to depict this conflict, Mahasweta and Morrison use the strategy of heteroglossia. Through the depiction of such conflicts the texts actually question the veracity of recorded accounts, in other words, the official, documented history. Simultaneously, the narratives also show how memory itself can be fabricated and modified. While Eliza modified her own memory, Karali modified
the collective memory of the villagers. Yet, their memories were located in a specific
time and space. In case of Eliza, it was memories of her birth in Valparaiso, and in case
of Karali it was memories of the death of his son and daughter-in-law. In contrast, Son
failed to recognise his memory of the “black women” as a “memory” set in a particular
time and space. He considered it as an absolute truth and from this point stemmed his
conflict with the present.

Since this de-mythification is a conscious process rooted in lived reality, it must
maintain its difference from myths, legends and folktales in general. Exclusion of the
cosmological level (Lévi-Strauss, 1967) enables Allende, Morrison and Mahasweta to
graft the stories on to concrete historical reality. Their fictions, as feminist
historiography, therefore, use the strategy of well-specified chronotopes to undermine the
existing myths, and to underscore their grounding in reality. By emphasising the
respective geographical, economic, sociological as well as historical levels, these texts
pave the ground for explorations of the role of human agency in the apparently
‘spontaneous’ process of mythification. The consequent emphasis of these texts on
human agency, and specially women’s agency, therefore facilitates feminist
deconstructions of the process of mythification. Allende, for instance, elaborates how the
interference of Jacob Todd shapes the Murieta myth. Symbolically the role played by
Todd can be read as depiction of the role of newspapers in the mythmaking process.
Besides the role of newspapers, Mahasweta also highlights the role of the traveller/tourist
in the dissemination of a myth. Morrison brings in the importance of media as well as the
commodity market to depict the impact of capitalist economy on folk myth. All these
mediations are challenged through women’s agency, through Eliza, Madhumati and Jadine.

In order to highlight the process of dissemination of myths and legends, the authors use the motif of journey. This motif, on the one hand, facilitates the scope to extend the locale of the story; on the other hand, the shift of geo-political location helps in incorporating various, and at times conflicting, view-points. For example, Eliza’s wanderings in California enable her to come across several versions of the Murieta myth; Dayadharma’s trip to Rajasthan acquaints him with the story and picture of Roop Kanwar. Jadine’s journey from Caribbean to Europe and USA familiarises her with several myths concerning ‘black’ women.

This inclusiveness of several viewpoints in these narratives through the motif of journey makes the feminist historiography more inclusive. It provides the authors the scope to engage with various view points without claiming veracity for any of those. For instance, in the course of Eliza’s journey Allende acquaints her readers with various versions of the Murieta myth, without ever claiming any one of those versions as real. Mahasweta and Morrison achieve similar purposes through the journeys of Dayadharma and Jadine respectively.

The motif of journey also enables the authors to track the trajectory of the mythmaking process. Allende and Mahasweta depict, through the respective journeys of Eliza and Dayadharma, the gradual evolution of the Murieta and sati myth – exactly how Joaquín Murieta becomes a legendary hero, and Roop Kanwar becomes a goddess.
Although Morrison does not depict the mythmaking process as such, she still uses the journey motif to draw attention to the transformations of the tar baby myth. It is Son’s location – in terms of his North American identity – that explains the difference between his version of the tar baby myth and the traditional African American versions. Thus Morrison also alludes to the mythmaking process.

Nevertheless, after laying bare this entire process of mythification and demythification, none of these authors chooses to ‘close’ their stories. On the contrary, after taking pains to explore the process of mythification, they, apparently quit midway without offering a definite ending. This open-endedness has a dual function. On the one hand, by not closing their stories with a final and solid ‘ending’ the authors avoid falling into the trap of yet another centrist viewpoint. On the other hand, the ‘loose’ ending signifies the potentially never-ending process of mythification. While demythifying the structure and functioning of patriarchies the authors are still conscious that this demythification is not final, and by keeping the ending ‘open’ they actually keep open chances of remythifications and further demythifications – a process which is potentially endless. In fact, Mahasweta highlights this perpetual nature of mythification in naming the last chapter of her story ‘The story is endless’. Thus the very form of these texts is inextricably linked with the content.  

One of the major challenges of fiction as feminist historiography is to retain its cultural specificity, in spite of its engagement with myths and legends, which are said to

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2 Reading the content of a text in isolation can lead us to very different conclusions, as Coleman (1986) has regarded Tar Baby as a “failure” chiefly due to its “superficial ending” (72).
be less culture specific. (Lévi-Strauss, 1955). It is important to retain this cultural specificity because it helps in rooting the story to a specific time and space. Such well-specified chronotopes of the stories intensify the challenge against official history. Morrison, for instance, deals with a folk myth. However, by rooting her story in the twentieth century Caribbean context, she ensures that Jadine’s story cannot be regarded as a myth; it has to be read as an account of the lived reality of a modern African American woman. Similarly, Allende and Mahasweta buttress their stories with the lived reality of a first generation Latina in California, and a twentieth century rural Indian woman with the weight of legend and myth respectively.

In addition to several geo-political, social and temporal allusions, this cultural specificity is manifest mainly through the language of the narratives. Mahasweta and Morrison, especially, deploy language as a tool to depict the social backdrop of their characters, which makes their texts more difficult to translate. Allende’s language, on the other hand, is more translatable, for it is less culture specific. The story of Hija is not restricted to a particular geo-political or temporal space. The temporal span is ten years, from 1843 to 1853 – larger than either ‘Maina sati’ or Tar Baby. Geographically it moves from Chile to California, and it is this journey that becomes very important in her text. Allende does not therefore focus on any particular version of the Murieta myth. On the contrary, she chooses to highlight the controversies that exist among all these versions in order to draw attention to the process of fabrication of a myth. That is to say, Allende’s act of specifying the geo-political and temporal backdrop of the story has a purpose completely different from either Mahasweta or Morrison. The non-cultural-specificity of the language in Hija may be ascribed to Allende’s attempt to allude to more than one
versions of the Murieta myth. Mahasweta and Morrison, however, chose to focus on a particular version – or rather, a particular aspect – of the ‘sati’ and the tar baby myth, respectively. Mahasweta draws on a particular historical incident, that of Roop Kanwar; and Morrison deals with the tar baby myth with respect to an African American woman. In order to highlight these specific aspects they need to graft their stories onto particular geo-political and temporal locations.

Simultaneously, the authors have also exposed the gender-biased nature of language itself. Despite its arbitrary nature, language is a construction. As writing was the jurisdiction of the ‘powerful’ so was written language. Consequently, language has been coloured by the thoughts of the ‘powerful’ group(s). Later, as women begin to deploy language in order to express their own reality, they discover that the mode of expression is already biased. The challenge of fiction as feminist historiography is thus redoubled since it has to construct its own mode of expression as well. The popular connotation of the words like Chilena, good woman, sati, black woman and so on and so forth clearly demonstrates the biased nature of Castellano, Bangla and English.

In fact, through such culture specific depiction of mythifications, Allende, Mahasweta and Morrison open up a new dimension by illustrating that myths may not be culture specific, but ‘mythification’ is indeed culture specific. Hence, a study of mythification is different from a study of myth. The myths that Allende, Mahasweta and Morrison deal with, cover vast cultural spans. As it has been mentioned earlier, the story of Joaquin Murieta is well known in northern Mexico, Chile, California, and parts of
Europe. As Fisch (2005) has depicted, the ‘custom’ of immolating women exists in a number of countries from all over the world, although in variable forms. The tar baby story, according to Espinosa, has 267 versions from all over the world. However, in *Hija*, ‘Maina sati’ and *Tar Baby* the authors depict the myth making process with respect to a particular aspect/version of these myths. Allende, for instance, focuses on the controversial nature of the Murieta myth, Mahasweta deals with the Roop Kanwar myth and Morrison draws on African American versions of the tar baby myth.

The smooth conversion of a linguistic sign into a mythic sign is made possible by the amalgamated efforts of various institutions like family, marriage, education, state, religion, ‘prostitution’ and so on - and umpteen beliefs and ideologies. These beliefs and ideologies include certain false notions like ‘good’ woman, ‘bad’ woman; certain ‘customary’ practices of sexual violence, like ‘sati’; as well as some beliefs – like ‘women look after home’ – that form certain ‘customs’ in respective cultures. The three texts exemplify the exact nature of collaboration of such ideologies and institutions in three different cultural contexts.

However, the regional aspects of patriarchies and their modes of collaboration with various beliefs and ideologies also come to the forefront in these texts. Christianity, for instance, has generally proclaimed God as male, thus ensuring the perpetuation of male power. And though the so-called Hindu religion acknowledges several gods and goddesses, it nevertheless perpetuates male power by glorifying certain aspects of
womanhood – like ‘fidelity’, ‘chastity’ and so on – while eliminating certain other – like intelligence, independence and such.

Irrespective of the contextual differences, the basic functioning of these institutions and beliefs remains similar. As Sangari and Vaid (1991) assert, certain beliefs and ideologies help in generating some institutions, which in turn, strengthen those beliefs and ideologies. However, the role of ideologies and institutions behind the perpetuation of the status quo has generally gone unquestioned because they have successfully mythified the reality to conceal their own role behind such manipulations. Therefore the State, Religion, the Education system, and such other institutions were not recognized, for centuries, as being gender-biased. In fact, the three texts chosen from the Spanish-American, Indian and African American context also elaborate the respective role that cultural imperialism, colonialism and migration play in the mythmaking process revealing how even these so-called socio-political phenomena are gendered. By exposing such gendered nature of almost all aspects of reality, the texts actually highlight the fabricated nature of reality and depict how masking the process of construction helps in deferring the process of deconstruction of the hierarchies by the ‘subordinates’. *Hija*, ‘Maina sati’ and *Tar Baby* work on two levels simultaneously. While one level unravels the patriarchal network by referring/alluding to the existing myths of Joaquin Murieta, Roop Kanwar, and the tar baby; the other level – through the stories of Eliza, Madhumati and Jadine – insists on creating a less-gendered reality.
A detail insight into the politics of power is found by linking gender identity to multiple human identities, like class, caste, national or ethnic identity. Irrespective of their differences, all these hierarchies function on an analogous ground where the ‘powerful’ exploit the ‘powerless’. These hierarchies, through their own sets of ideologies and institutions, work hand in hand to construct and uphold a myth, and thus they also strengthen each other. Any attempt of de-mythification, therefore, must begin by exposing this nexus. However, locating such a nexus is not an easy task. For instance, both Allende and Morrison have concentrated on selected aspects of racism in the context of the United States of America. While Allende highlights the struggle of a Latina against the ‘white’ Americans, Morrison depicts the struggle of an African American woman in the ‘white’ United States of America. Although both refer to the plurality of races in USA, they still chose to focus on one single race in their respective texts, instead of the general problem of racism. Singling out a particular race, on the one hand, enables the authors to depict the exact nature of the racial and gender struggles of a Latina/African American woman. On the other hand, by centring on one race, the texts marginalise other races.

Such marginalisation on the grounds of ethnicity and the exclusive focus on intra-race relations, and of a specific race with the dominant one, with no depiction of the inter-race relations with other marginalized races, results in the presentation of a skewed picture and actually thwarts the possibilities of conceptualising solidarities between women of different marginalized races. The exclusive focus on one single race becomes even more prominent when, while depicting the struggles of a Latina in the mid-nineteenth century USA Allende – in spite of the strong Chinese connection in her story – never gives enough importance to the subjectivity of Chinese women, and not even refers
to a single African American woman; or while narrating the struggles of an African American woman during the seventies, Morrison never mentions the similar problems of a Latina or women of any other ethnic identity in USA.

A comparative approach to these texts also illustrates the range of women’s exploitation, which can be physical, psychological or potential. It has been a part of patriarchal strategy to highlight sexual violence against women, and thereby the vulnerability of female body. Demythification of patriarchies involves bringing into focus the importance of the so-far neglected psychological and potential exploitation of women. Thus it widens the definition of the word ‘violence’ and exposes the full magnitude of patriarchal violence. Simultaneously, it also requires redefinitions of sexual violence to include physical violence caused in the name of ‘religious custom’, ‘popular beliefs’ or established ideologies. By emphasising the violent aspects of a religious custom like ‘sati’ (Madhumati was actually murdered by her father-in-law), or customs related to women’s dress in nineteenth century Chile (Eliza could barely breathe under the layers of corsets and petticoats), or ‘black’ women’s preoccupation with cooking (Ondine, irrespective of her sore feet, would insist on cooking for all), the three texts actually call for such redefinitions.

This comparative reading projects ‘fiction as feminist historiography’ as an analytical category which facilitates understanding of the patriarchal power-politics, and also elaborates various modes of resistance against it. Thus, through the potential of narrative, fiction as feminist historiography restores the importance of women in society,
and challenges the dominant power-politics by reconstructing alternative versions of history. The advantage of such alternative versions of history is that they are more inclusive than the ‘official’ version of history. Instead of taking the dominant power-politics for granted, Allende, Mahasweta and Morrison question the existing power-politics from various points of view, thereby exposing the gendered nature of almost all aspects of reality. Besides, through their de-mythification of existing myths the authors demonstrate how it is possible to construct a less-gender-biased society.