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A Feminist Perspective on Family in Recent Ethnic American Literature

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1. INTRODUCTION

The second half of the 20th century is what Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller call the Age of Migration: the intensified diasporic movements of people across national borders – documented and undocumented, voluntary and compelled, and the traffic of ideas, cultural forms and practices worldwide that accompany these migrations (Friedman 7). In the post-1945 era, the United States became an exemplary democracy, hence becoming a utopian place to live to many people across the globe. Some elements that affected this are the radically new technologies of travel and communication which have heightened global interconnectedness and, as such, they have increased diasporic consciousness among migrants because the old homes can be much more present in the lives of migrating people (Friedman 9).

The last quarter of the 20th century has been marked by a new, massive immigration wave (Mesić 289). It was an answer to the global migrations on one hand, and, on the other, to the special role of the United States as a leading economic and military force in the world. By the year 1990, almost a quarter of U.S. citizens were members of one of the following ethnic minorities: Afro-Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans or Native Americans (Mesić 290). Women constitute roughly half of all migrants to the United States (K. Johnson 305). The second wave of immigration and the reconstitution of the U.S. as a country of immigration gained momentum in the 1970s, and they are the two of most radically transformative forces in remaking the U.S. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 107). Thus, the field of women's immigration history in the United States plays a particularly important role and has been transformed ever since the last three decades of the 20th century. Its main occupation was to explore the mobility of people, women in particular, and its impact on the relationship between genders. Gender has become more and more important in the studies of immigration and ethnicity, and not just when it comes to investigating family roles or sexuality (Schneider).

Fictional women writers have been popular in transmitting the story of women immigrants since before the 20th century, and towards the end of the millennium, a new generation of fiction (rather than autobiographical texts) writers of novels and

stories about immigrant women have emerged. The main concern of these writers are their protagonists' lives, or to put it differently, finding a voice or giving voice to women "amid the dislocating and fractured experiences of immigration and arrival in an alien, usually urban American environment" (Schneider). Some of the most representative female writers on this topic are Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*) and Fae Myenne Ng (*Bone*), who are concerned with the Chinese experience in the United States. Kingston gives a slightly older perspective since her book was first published in 1976, while *Bone* was published in 1993. Sandra Cisneros (*The House on Mango Street*) represents the Mexican experience, while Cristina Garcia (*Dreaming in Cuban*) represents the Cuban experience. When it comes to Haiti, Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a good reference point. As for an Arab, or to be more precise Syrian perspective, Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* provides a good insight.

These works will be used as reference points for comparison to show what different female perspectives on the immigrant experience look like because the increased attention to women caught up in the process of immigration to the U.S. has given rise to women's fiction dealing explicitly with those issues. Those novels are representative because the reader can get a clear insight into the changes within the families when confronted with migration, and get a sense of how gender roles also can become distorted in order to adapt more successfully to a new situation. The mother-daughter relationship is considered to be one of the strongest family bonds, so it will be used to observe the gendering of immigration and prove the point that gender should be recognized as a constitutive element of immigration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 117).

1.1. LITERATURE ON AND BY WOMEN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Women's history and immigrant history did not take a prominent place in American historical scholarship between the late 1930s and the late 1960s. The reason for that is an academic focus on political and diplomatic history, given the circumstances which included the two world wars and a momentary hiatus in mass migration which the wars caused (Hondagneu-Sotelo 108). The primary modes of analysis were class and ethnicity, while gender differences were included under the family life category. According to Dorotea Schneider, there are two trends which gradually changed these paradigms by the 1970s. Firstly, scholars re-discovered the writing of the earlier generation of women on the immigrant experience, and secondly, labor historians embraced the history of immigrants in general and of women in particular as part of the history of the North American working class. That development is closely connected to the emergence of women's history in general and of feminist literature in particular. Consequently, this led to the re-discovery through re-publication of older literary and scholarly writings by immigrant women, as well as about women immigrants.

Since the late 1980s, the paradigms have shifted away from focusing mostly on European people's and the working-class history model. Thanks to the changes in U.S. politics, the focus now was on the growing immigration of East and South Asians, Central and Latin Americans, as well as the immigrants from the Caribbean. With the change in the context, scholars have now put the themes of transnationalism and gendered assimilation at the center of their attention (Schneider). The historical perspective was put into second place, while the main focus was on cultural and social assimilation and economic mobility. In any case, there have been essential connectors between the new research on post-1965 movement and the more established, to a great extent chronicled historical writing. For one, the focus on racial definitions, racial discrimination, and segregation as topics critical for researchers of migration for quite a while have been re-approved with regards to the more current examinations. The tenor of these studies had been the struggle for emancipation and most importantly for true citizenship within the "white Republic" of the United States (Schneider).

Early books did not bother to make a difference between the experiences of immigrant and second generation or the native people. Thus, they did not provide a more in-depth research; rather, such books were written as contributions to the emancipatory quest of women of color in the United States. Among more recent books, the account of emancipation and battle against mistreatment loans the predominant storyline to the historical backdrop of East Asian and Latino settlers' in America right up until the present time (Schneider). In the study of Afro-Caribbean immigrants, the inquiries of racial self-definition, as well as racial classification by others, frame a perplexing interaction with the questions of gender. In the cases of scholarly studies on Mexican, Dominican and other Latina women, race and ethnic culture fuse in a slightly different way. In the case of Mexican immigrants, they were vastly represented in earlier studies which follow the model of other working-class immigrant histories whose subjects were characterized by their geographical position. The attention is also on the family and a sense of (local) community, but it was not until only recently that the scholars have analyzed the *barrio*'s women by focusing on gender roles. What those analyses discovered is that women, at last, take a leading role in the consolidation of the permanent settlement of Mexican families in the US (Schneider).

Unlike Mexicans, Cuban Americans and Cuban immigrant women, in particular, are not seen as embedded in racial or underclass stereotypes. Instead, when it comes to the economic mobility and cultural assimilation, they are more likely to become members of the middle-class society. Still, Cuban community remains preoccupied with exile. In this context, exile was seen as a state of being defined as an exclusion from social and cultural traditions and institutions in the new country (Schneider).

On the other hand, Arab Americans took quite some time to be recognized as white by the United States government, in order for them not to fall under the Asian exclusion laws (Schneider). However, they are also not in the best position since their religion is considered to define their "otherness", and as such defines the position of an Arab immigrant woman.

1.2. GENDERING OF IMMIGRATION

The last three decades of the 20th century are marked by a vigorous resurgence in U.S. immigration, with the vast majority of these immigrant the members of Asian, Latin American and Caribbean nations. There are certain changes in the profiles of those immigrants; for example, they are no longer only poor, manual workers but a substantial number of them are also entrepreneurs and highly educated urban professionals. Furthermore, today's immigrants include displaced peasants and refugees fleeing war and religious or political execution (Hondagneu-Sotelo 108).

Women, historically, comprised only a distinct minority of immigrants to the New World. In the 19th century when large numbers of immigrants were sojourners intending to stay only a short time, women were perhaps only a third of all who came (Daniels 274). That changed by the end of the mid-20th century when women comprised an absolute majority of all immigrants, although men continued to predominate among some groups. In addition, sending for brides from the old country was also a clear sign of the intent to become permanent settlers as opposed to the earlier sojourners (Daniels 274). What is also important to mention is how crucial the presence of immigrant women was to the establishment and survival of immigrant communities.

For many women living in the U.S. meant the expansion of life opportunities, which happened as a direct consequence of the organized feminist movement, which was manifested, among others, in the proliferation of shelters for abused women, legislation against domestic violence and against legal discrimination against women and girls in sports, education, work and politics, laws against sexual harassment in the workplace, and the expansion of reproductive rights (Hondagneu-Sotelo 109). The second wave of the organized feminist movement looked directly for inspiration to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which played an important role in pushing the nation to end all forms of legal discrimination, including racial exclusion provision in immigration laws (Hondagneu-Sotelo 110). One of the key documents in this respect is The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 also known as the Hart–Celler Act, which abolished the quota system and ended racial exclusionary policies. By liberalizing the rules for immigration, especially by prioritizing family

reunification, it also stimulated rapid growth of immigration numbers. Once immigrants had naturalized, they were able to sponsor relatives in their native lands in an ever-lengthening migratory process called chain migration (Kammer). This marks the beginning of the period of rights-based liberalism that is widely recognized as inclusive of racial and ethnic minorities as new immigrants. Furthermore, the 1980 Refugee Act made it possible to provide asylum to those with well-founded fears of persecution, regardless of political orientation (Hondagneu-Sotelo 110). The gradual extension of rights to racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants in the second half of the 20th century brought also newly organized backlashes and immigration restriction efforts.

Feminist movement may have delayed responding to immigrant women's issues partly because immigrants have not been a popular or powerful group, so it was slow and has yet to fully recognize the diverse needs of immigrant women of color (Hondagneu-Sotelo 111). However, the progress which was made can be divided into three stages. The first happened in the 1970s and early 1980s ("women and migration") and it sought to remedy the exclusion of women from immigration research (Hondagneu-Sotelo 113). This was the first step of adding women in migration to the research subjects, and it gained its momentum in that period. The second stage ("gender and migration") happened during the 1980s and early 1990s, and it heightened awareness of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender relations recognizing the fluidity of gender relations (Hondagneu-Sotelo 115). In other words, the focus was on the gendering of migration patterns and on the way migration reconfigures systems of gender inequality or the ways in which gender relations change through the process of migration. Some of the results of the women's migration are changes in marriage patterns, new living and working arrangements which ultimately change the rules that govern daily life (Hondagneu-Sotelo 116). The third stage is happening since the 1990s and its primary occupation is viewing gender as a constitutive element of immigration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 117). Gender is important because it permeates a variety of practices, identities, and institutions; for example, immigrant women (Mexican Americans) are more likely than immigrant men to participate in community organizations that interface with U.S. institutions (Hondagneu-Sotelo 117). However, the problem still remains and that is the fact that

women's experiences are still not sufficiently recognized in the vast majority of immigration studies.

1.3. ETHNICITY AND GENDER

Every ethnic written work carries in it a unique “dislocatory force”, or to put it differently, a resistance to being thought “representative” (Lee 5). Those works, however, are first given a nod of recognition, but later simply absorbed into the standard American canon (Lee 5). At least that was the case of American studies until the rise of ethnic studies in the last quarter of the 20th century. By the end of the century, quite a number of scholars began to speak about the always changing dynamic of America as ethnic-cultural regime (Lee 5). Some of the newer aspects that became the center of attention are cultural nationalism, ethnic feminism, contact zones and diasporic writing (Šesnić 12). What is important to mention is that those notions are constrained by their immediate context but are also successfully working to expand its limitations (Šesnić 13). Political circumstances had a great impact on recent American ethnic literature. Some of the movements which marked the second half of 20th century were the Black Civil Rights movement, the Chicano movement, Red Power and Asian American pan-ethnic activism as well as feminist movements (Šesnić 13).

Immigrant women are faced with the struggle which concerns all migrants (like those against immigration laws) on one hand, and on the other, there are struggles which might concern only one particular ethnic group such as Latinas for instance. Consequently, the intersections between class, ethnic and gender features are considered to be important in the development of particular forms of political consciousness and action (such as the feminist movement and different ethnic movements, or the intersection thereof). Gender divisions relate to the organization of sexual difference and biological reproduction and establish forms of representation around these; in addition, they also usually work with a notion of a “natural” relationship between social effects and sexual differences/biological reproduction.

1.4. THE IMMIGRANT FAMILY AS THE NEW FRONTIER

The traditional role which a woman plays in the family is mothering children, making a home, loving and being loved, and it shows softness and hardness, as well as strength and weakness (Friedan 73). Nevertheless, the movement to equality and the personhood of women isn't finished until motherhood is a fully free choice (Friedan 74). The disposition of woman, her second-class status in society was in historical reality linked to that biological state of motherhood (Friedan 77). The needs of children and men for nurturing and loving care are met by women, but it is also important to mention that women are also motivated by the needs for mastery, power, assertiveness, security, and control (Friedan 79). In other words, women are naturally protective of their families, while their families seek different forms of protection or comfort. The reason for this situation comes from that when women were denied access to satisfaction of those needs within society; they simply made home and the family into a vehicle for their power, control, status, and self-realization (Friedan 80). As Friedman states, women had no option but to assume the power of woman as a mother in a family (81).

Despite that, daughters very often do not want to be like their mothers, because in a way it is at odds with "their" feminism (Friedan 81). As with all social movement, ethnic movements also have people whose opinions do not concur with feminist ideas. Thus, the "enemies of feminism" claim that woman's move to equality, self-realization and her own power in society is destroying the family, which according to them is the "woman's real locus of power". On the other hand, many feminists insist that family is the prime obstacle to woman's self-realization (Friedan 82). In some cases, that might be true. Friedman states that "when women were totally defined as housewife-mothers, nurturers, servants of the family, and when home and children were totally women's world, the case histories of psychologically wounded children and men almost by definition had to point to the omnipresent mother as villain" (Friedan 83). However, the future of the family is an overriding feminist issue (Friedan 90). The reason for that stern demand that a woman places on herself as a mother, and on her children, could never be satisfied in reality. New mothers do not want to be like their mothers before them, i.e. daughters are not trying to copy their

mothers; rather, they desire to move away from them, which also becomes apparent through the analysis of the chosen novels (Friedan 101).

The best context to explore gender (or rather feminine) issues is through the family. Some of the problems occurring in the process of immigration are that families get separated, educational goals conflict and linguistic problems are the most common ones. One might refer to the immigrants as “in-betweeners” because they left their homeland, but do not really belong to their new home (for example language, racial or religious barriers). The relationship between mothers and daughters is one of the best examples for exploring the problems because it includes family ties but also gender issues. As a result, issues of educational access for daughters and adult women are all prominent discussion points and indicators of change within this community as they have been for other groups before them.

1.5. IMMIGRANT LITERATURE – MINOR LITERATURE

One thing the migrants in the United States have in common is writing about their experiences. Ever since the discovery of North American continent and the formation of the United States of America, people have been recording their findings, their voyages, their encounters, and experiences about the country. Although the United States' literary history is not very longstanding in comparison to Europe's, its role, however, must not be regarded as unimportant. Since the country was made up of immigrants from its inception, it is somehow interesting that nowadays that same country has a problem with accepting immigrants and what they stand for. The problematics of a society is best shown through its art, or to be more specific, in this case, its literature. Since the 1970s scholars have been largely occupied by the ethnic studies methodological approach, researching how ethnic, ethnicity, identity and nationality infuse works of literature.

One of the most important aspects, in this case, is the way different ethnics experience and live their state of ethnicity (Šesnić 10). The results of this research can help to understand “how the terms and conditions of becoming American have changed in the post-1965 American scape while admitting that the siren call for belonging and acculturation has not lost its appeal” (Šesnić 11). The most significant and most visible shifts occurred in the resurgence of ethnicity in the second half of 20th century, followed by the increase in the number of visibly new ethnicities (Šesnić 11). There was a call for a massive change of perception and redress, especially in the light of the identity politics of the 1960s in which civil rights became the center point (Lee 2). One interesting phenomenon is that despite having great cultural diversities, the United States does not treat all of them the same way. Hence in this context, a situation of a “minority within minority” ethnic population occurs and suggests a lesser order of literary-cultural interest and achievement (Lee 2). The nations that were considered a part of the margins were first of all Native Americans that had become so by “historic evisceration and dispersal, and whether on or off-reservation” (Lee 1). The Afro-America found both in the South and the North, is seen as an “other” America based on its color-line and ghettos which are associated with their subcultures of language, crime, music or fashion (Lee 1). Spanish-speakers, notably

Chicano/a, Puerto Rican and Cuban-Floridian, likewise exist as “an American elsewhere” – Hispanic, brown and usually poor. Asian America had arisen out of Pacific migrancy, and another large group of more recent migrants comprises the Arab America (Lee 2). These groups are represented through the novels written by female members of those minorities and the focus will be on the “otherness” of their experiences, within the family context.

Deleuze and Guattari employ the phrase minor literature – which seems particularly crucial for minorities who want to remain minorities and affirm perspectives that are not those of the culture they inhabit (Deleuze and Guattari 16). To put it differently, minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language. In the case of recent ethnic American literature, this means that works were written by authors who are of Asian, Mexican, Haitian, Arab or Cuban descent, meaning that they form the category of minor literature because they are all written in English (major language in this case) and not in the authors’ native language. Those works help in understanding the circumstances of one’s foreign upbringing and life experiences before and after the migration to the United States and by using the major language, the authors make sure that their “legacy” is not exclusive to a particular minority, but rather that it can be used as a reference point by anyone. By writing in English, the authors do not fall into the category of “an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses” (Deleuze and Guattari 16). It is also possible to say that they use the major language to emphasize their departure from the motherland. Since they are physically present somewhere else, they in a way cut the main tie with the homeland. In the same way, the family triangle is connected to other commercial, economic, bureaucratic, and judicial triangles which determine its value. For example, some questions which might seem rather unimportant and are of passing interest to a few in the homeland might be a matter of life and death in immigration. Literature having the role and the function of collective and even revolutionary utterance is especially “contaminated” by the political field. Those characteristics amount to the conclusion that “minor” no longer characterizes certain literature but describes the revolutionary conditions of any literature displaying specific (linguistic, political, etc.) features within an established literature (Deleuze and Guattari 24). It also means that the writers of minor literature

are a part of the resistance against the standard, so they are bringing more attention to the marginal but nonetheless equally important, and valuable literature.

2. ASIAN AMERICAN ETHNIC LITERATURE

When considering Asian American literature in view of the feminist perspective intersecting with the study of the (ethnic) family structure, we need to make a few general observations. In the traditional East Asian patriarchal constructions of society, the polarities between feminine and masculine assertions of identity were already present. A history of racism in immigration laws (applies to Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, and Filipino male immigration and delayed entry for women) that disempowered Asian males and separated them for long periods of time from women and their families further aggravated those problems.

Only in the 1970s was the notion of Asian American literature recognizable as a separate canon. Some scholars made this in a way paradoxical phenomenon known as a “new tradition”. Shirley Geok-lin Lim says that even as the texts are self-conscious expressions of “a new political consciousness and identity,” their commentaries locate them in a “recovered” ethnic history. Texts like Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) or Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* (1993) represent works whose textuality appears for the first time before our eyes, but we are reminded that the images were posed in a time already past, that history and textuality form one subject. Readers are to approach those texts within the context of the past: memoir, myth, family and community history, folk tales, and talk-story. An especially prominent feature of a great deal of Asian American literature and criticism is this insistence on past narrative, whether as Old World culture and values, immigrant history, race suffering, communal traditions, or other language traces. Just as important is the recovery of a woman’s culture, women’s language and neglected women’s texts and traditions which form a major feature of feminist criticism. In the feminist autobiography of the 1970s and 1980s, women move from the private to the public sphere and break away from their place in patriarchy, emphasizing “internal growth and self-understanding rather than public self-recognition” (Felski, qtd. in Nishime 79). Some historical and political background will help to understand better those occurrences.

The changes in the immigration laws in 1965 that altered the race quota to nationality criteria and the Family Reunification Act of 1968 led to an increase in the

Asian population numbers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Americans of Asian and Pacific Island descent has more than doubled between the 1980s and 1990s (Geok-lin Lim 576). Female writers not only have to face the problems of a patriarchal ethnic community but also their ethnic and feminist values and identities must inevitably intersect in potentially uneasy, conflicting or violent ways. A traditional role that an ethnic woman plays is the victim, while ethnic patriarch is a villain. However, there are some alternatives to this narrative. For example, patriarchal societies always put the fathers of the families as central figures, the providers. By changing and inserting the setting of a story or a text into a new country (the United States in this particular case), the narrative seen through the Asian American daughters' eyes is drastically different. Asian fathers are facing humiliation and losses and struggle against white social authority (racism), just as Asian mothers faced patriarchy and similar humiliating treatment in their homeland. As Geok-lin Lim puts it, "the Asian American female, in order to pursue her interests in a race-conscious society, has to modify her rejection of patriarchal ethnic identity" (579). Furthermore, the construction of gender does not need to be dependable on the ethnic versions of female roles and experiences, nor need the construction of ethnicity depend on patriarchal constructions of an ethnic group.

2.1. MAXINE HONG KINGSTON: *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*

One of the most important Asian American female writers is Maxine Hong Kingston. She is one of the main protagonists of a new “wave” of feminism which included ethnic groups, especially the experience of women immigrants to the United States. Her most notable work *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* was published in 1976 and it was immediately recognized at the time since feminism and multiculturalism were gaining strength and public attention in the American society in the mid-1970s. Even though it was not written as a political statement, the book spoke to both causes with remarkable immediacy. Its central subjects are the place of women in Chinese society (especially in immigrant communities), the relationship of mothers and daughters, and the experience of immigration. *The Woman Warrior* is a memoir because it is partly based on the experience and life of the author. The book is divided into five parts (“No Name Woman”, “White Tigers”, “Shaman”, “At the Western Palace”, and “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”). Kingston combines the elements of (auto) biography, memoir, history, fiction, fictionalized history, myth, and legend. Each part tells the story from a particular point of view, or rather how the voices of characters change in each.

The novel tells a story about a second generation Chinese American girl’s coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s in the shadow of a domineering mother and then the growth of a writer/storyteller whose female and artistic personality is shaped by her mother’s stories, following the cultural tensions of the Chinese immigrants to America (Wong and Santa Ana 194). The narrator is searching for her place within the community and her family and the meaning of her identity as a Chinese American (Nishime 73). The focus on the mother-daughter relationship is a part of a feminist agenda to preserve memory and establish a matrilineal tradition and it is accomplished by using historical fiction to imaginatively reconstruct the lives of strong women who could be claimed as foremothers (Wong and Santa Ana 195).

The story is told through the voices of the girl (the daughter), the sister, the woman, the mother, the refugee, the immigrant, and special attention is given to the difference between Chinese and the mainstream American voices. The voice is an important part of Chinese culture, and Kingston uses that fact to start her novel by

telling the story of an aunt who was simply forgotten after committing suicide and disgracing the family (*The Woman Warrior* [WW] 5). She is never spoken of and this silence of the family is her punishment even after she's dead; the family deliberately forgets her (WW 16). By recording the aunt's tragic story, her pregnancy, and suicide, the narrator (Kingston's alter ego) takes revenge on the culture that denies female voice, and who also has "no name" (Jenkins 66).

When it comes to the immigrant experience, the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around their childhoods fits in solid America (WW 5). However, a concern for ethnic continuity dominates the thinking of the immigrant parents and thus, they limit their efforts at acculturation to acquiring those skills necessary to succeed in business (Hunsaker 441). On the other hand, the children of these immigrants are attempting to make themselves less culturally distinct, and hence they move away from the traditions and languages of their parents by speaking English (Hunsaker 441). A pattern of movement away from the family is present, especially from the mother. The mother in this novel kept her Chinese name after coming to America – Brave Orchid. Other than her name, she kept some of her old country customs, but she took to wearing American fashions (WW 100). Even though those customs might seem as cruel, such as, for example, when she cuts her daughter's tongue so that she would not be tongue-tied ("Your tongue would be able to move in any language" [WW 164]), it actually shows how she did it to provide more opportunities in the new country to her daughter. By doing so, the mother sets her loose somehow of the restrictions she was born with as a woman in a patriarchal community; the daughter is now equipped to walk a path of her own choice, with a free tongue (Lim 56). Even though it is a violent act, it is also an act of liberation. Moreover, by saying the opposite thing, Brave Orchid expresses her care and love ("That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite." [WW 178]). However, her daughter is enrolled both in an American and in a Chinese school (WW 167). There another cultural difference sprung into the spotlight. Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy, so Chinese-American girls had to whisper to make themselves American-feminine (WW 172). Chinese girls are less 'valued' in their community, which is a recurring theme throughout the novel; "There is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls" (WW 46), "During the war, though, when you were born, many people gave older girls away for free" (WW 83).

The feminist initiative seen in this novel is shown through the mother, Brave Orchid, in the way she used the money her husband sent her to educate herself, and in the way, she tried to pass on her knowledge onto her children, while at the same time trying to accommodate herself to American society. The position of women in Chinese society had changed after the Revolution, hence they fought against girl slavery and infanticide, so girls would no longer have to commit suicide rather than get married (WW 191). By telling the talk-stories to her (living) children, Brave Orchid transfers Chinese culture to them and makes China more and more present (Hunsaker 449).

The daughter, born in the U.S., represents the immigrant experience as the first generation abroad (WW 187). Her development from childhood was mostly influenced by her mother's stories, about her family but also the Chinese myths, especially the one in which Brave Orchid sets up the swordswoman Fa Mu Lan as a heroic role model, paradoxically defying the traditional Chinese image of women as worthless (Lightfoot 60). The narrator strongly identifies with her adulterous aunt whom she calls her "forerunner" (WW 8) as well as the swordswoman Fa Mu Lan. Eventually, she realized that her mother's power of "talking story" was analogous to the woman warrior's strength (Lightfoot 60). Thus, Brave Orchid is a real-life role model for her daughter in childhood, and she was also defying the Chinese taboo on education for women (Lightfoot 61). Her daughter grows up into a young person who refuses to follow the Chinese tradition: "I refuse to shy my way through our Chinatown, which tasks me with the old sayings and the stories" (WW 53). She breaks the "double binds which China wraps around her feet" even in America by standing up to her mother, and she did that in a form of a list of over 200 things that she had to tell to her mother so that she would know the true things about her and to "stop the pain in her throat" which she felt when she did not speak her mind (WW 194). Furthermore, she uses language to link herself to family and heritage through an act which involves cutting the body, which means that, ultimately, Brave Orchid's action is a successful effort to open the world to the child (Hunsaker 454). In the end, she comes to the conclusion that the only way for her to see the world logically was to leave home (WW 204).

Language forges the link and female relatives are the ones who resurrect the ghosts of the family (Griffiths 362). The narrator's ability to "talk story" just like Brave Orchid eases the tension between daughter and mother, and the tale about the

family becomes a joint creation of the two women (Hunsaker 457); “The beginning is hers, the ending is mine” (WW 240). To conclude, the mother and daughter share a story, and by writing the ending, the daughter makes it her own and writes herself into a communal myth (Nishime 80). Finally, the narrator reconfigures the traditional myth so that she acts as the woman warrior who avenges her family and bears their testimony on her skin (Griffiths 364).

2.2. FAE MYENNE NG: *BONE*

Some 20 years later, Fae Myenne Ng writes her novel *Bone* (1993) as a representation of a more recent position of Chinese American women. A family of three girls wasn't considered to be lucky by Chinese standards (Bone [B] 1). The parents have moved to San Francisco which the daughters consider "our family's oldest place, our beginning place, our new China" (B 2). The three daughters (Nina, Ona, and Leila) are also the "lucky generation" because they do not have to worry about their citizenship in a country where "paper is more precious than blood" (B 7). The mother (Mah) and her partner in America (Leon) made sacrifices and put up with humiliation in America so that the children could have it better (B 33). It portrays a "make-do family" in which a father of the household is biologically unrelated to the young female protagonist (Wong and Santa Ana 202). The family is also characterized by the division, being caught in competing "culturalist fantasies" of what it means to be Chinese and to have a Chinese understanding of Ona's suicide (Hong Sohn, Lai and Goellnicht 11). It is a story about young, fatherless daughters trained in ancestral customs, who struggle to integrate their family's history into their current lives (Stephenson 170).

This novel shows changes in the Chinese American mindset when compared to *The Woman Warrior* because the family from *Bone* believes that "remembering the past gives power to the present. Memories do add up and count to keep the dead from becoming strangers" (B 85). Another point stated in *Bone* is that family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history (B 33). The mother in *The Woman Warrior* also used stories to teach her children about their heritage, but it did not have the same effect as in *Bone*. In *Bone*, the central theme becomes the usage of the story of the power of China in immigrants' minds, their need to carry an image of home in their memory, their desire to return and their permanent displacement (Stephenson 175). What both families share is the belief in America's big promises and the disappointment when it did not come true (100). Moreover, both families suffer a tragedy; in *The Woman Warrior* Brave Orchid loses two children before emigrating to the U.S., and in *Bone* the middle sister Ona commits suicide by throwing herself off a building, whilst living in America (B 12). Ona's example is also

similar to the treatment which the aunt got in *The Woman Warrior* where both characters represent a shame for the family and are not spoken of (B 13).

The main voice of the novel *Bone* is Leila, the youngest daughter. Her life is mostly influenced by the feeling of guilt (each member of the family struggles with feelings of guilt and blame [Stephenson 174]) because of having a better life than her mother, thus she works as a bridge between the classroom teacher and the Chinese parents by helping Chinese children to accommodate themselves to their lives in America (B 14). She protects, guides, listens to, and translates for her Chinese elders (Stephenson 174). Unlike her oldest sister, Nina, who wants the family to be the last thing on her mind (and hence moved all the way to New York, to be as far from them as possible), Leila has the closest relationship with Mah (B 22). However, this also makes her full of resentment towards her mother because of her stubborn one-track moaning, towards her sister Nina because of her moving away and her “safe distance” (B 88). What is more, the complexity of Leila’s and Mah’s relationship is expressed in the mutual feeling of guilt. Leila is not able to leave her mother (“I can’t help it, I just feel like I owe her. It’s always been just me and her” (B 181), and Mah blames herself for the death of her middle daughter as well as making sacrifices for 25 years to provide a better life to her children (“Better a parent before a child, better a wife than a husband” [B 13]). While Leila and her mother stayed in Chinatown, always worrying about the opinions and the acceptance of the Chinese community in the U.S., Nina brought shame to the family by having an abortion (B 23) which leads to her exile from the family and the community. The main difference between Leila and Nina lies in their respect towards their heritage; Leila dedicated herself to helping Chinese children and staying with her mother, while Nina decided to “do things on her own” and to go as far as using the chopsticks (Chinese tradition) only to hold her hair up (B 25). Mah’s failed marriage is also something which she blames herself for not providing a good enough example for her daughters, and it can be connected to the ill-fated relationship between Ona and the son of a dishonest businessman who ruined their family (Stephenson 175). What is interesting, Mah also blames the family’s women and their choices in love as the source of discontent, not looking outward to blame society or Leon for controlling and limiting those choices (Stephenson 175).

Leila serves as a probing narrator trying to reconcile herself with her past, her identity and the immigrant generation’s stories (Stephenson 174). Although she has

never seen her biological father, she still has a strong inheritance of stories and attitudes from her stepfather Leon (Stephenson 175). Thus, the novel also shows how Chinese ancestral traditions and blood connections shift in the United States because family is no longer bound by blood, rather by the stories.

3. LATINO AND CARIBBEAN ETHNIC WRITING

In this chapter, the novels by a Mexican, a Cuban and a Haitian female author will be explored, in chronological order. Despite Haiti's mainly French culture, and it technically not being a Latino country, it is grouped in this category because of the parallels between the so-called “island writing” between Cuban American and Haitian American literature.

When it comes to Latinas, Cherrie Moraga describes how their relationships to ideals of gender and motherhood have been uniquely shaped by colonization; “The fear of extinction strengthened the commitment to traditional family ideals and roles, such as encouraging women to be pregnant and assuming males at the head of the household” (qtd. in Elkholy). Gloria Anzaldua provides another point which is that the internalization of racism and colonialist mentality has given rise to shame, self-hatred, and abuse of Latinas in various communities. Within the Latina community, there are also limited positions of superiority. In other words, Latinas who have a lighter skin color or do not speak the language of their ancestors are often cast out of the community.

The Caribbean history was and still is characterized by migration. Ever since the colonial period, colonial subjects were brought to the metropolitan centers across the world by their masters. The influx of these groups to the U.S. mainland dates back to the 1820s, but the significant flows have been noticeable since the early 1970s (García 114). By 1990, some 12% of all citizens born in the non-sovereign Caribbean were living in the U.S. and Canada (Oostindie and Klinkers 194). Since they are primarily agricultural societies, postindustrial America serves as a major impetus for migration (García 117). Famine, misery, and growing political repression are some of the major factors which contributed to the migration. The political rule of Duvalier and economic disaster that went with it have served to motivate thousands of Haitians to flee their island; they compare their situation to refugees from Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and Cuba (García 121). Most of the immigrants are female, who although having better success in finding employment than their male counterparts, their wages are quite low (García 122). Caribbean immigrants represent a group frustrated by a corrupt, misguided, incompetent, and stagnant political and economic system and

leadership. They serve as a significant supply to the service and manufacturing sectors of the northeastern part of the U.S. and are characterized by strong ties with the homeland, reinforced by family ties or return visits (García 125).

3.1. SANDRA CISNEROS: *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*

Mexican American experience is described in the novel *The House on Mango Street*. The book was written in 1980 in Chicago, but published in 1984 (*The House on Mango Street* [HMS] xv). It's a compilation of short stories which together aim to fulfill the author's wishes to write "stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children's nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico" (HMS xvii). To put it differently, the author is trying to write a work which could bring the Mexican immigrant experience closer to a wider audience (hence, she uses English as the language of expression).

Esperanza Cordero is a young Latina girl and the novel is narrated through her voice. By telling the story through a 12-year-old Esperanza's point of view, Cisneros is empowering someone who is normally not seen as possessing authority in the world – a young Hispanic female (Brunk 148). Family tends to be a privileged cultural space, space which contributes decisively to the formation of a Hispanic child (Szadziuk 118). However, a rift between Esperanza and her family is present and is related to the traditional, Hispanic model in general and to the woman's role in particular. Women ill-treated by their fathers or partners are the norm rather than the exception (Szadziuk 119). Female oppression is symbolized by Esperanza's great-grandmother and her place by the window. She is a strong woman who attempted to resist marriage until she was "carried off" by the narrator's great-grandfather "as if she were a fancy chandelier" ([HMS 10] Grobman 44).

Due to her Mexican background, and her current life in America, Esperanza is constantly analyzing the differences in language usage and how they affect her way of viewing the world; "When she thinks to herself in her father's language, she knows sons and daughters don't leave their parent's house until they marry. When she thinks in English, she knows she should've been on her own since eighteen" (HMS xiii). The bilingualism is a theme occurring in literature written by immigrant authors (especially Spanish speaking ones), and they very often explore not only how they personally use it, but also their family members. For example, Esperanza contemplates something as basic as her name and how it changes depending on the language; "In English my

name means hope. In Spanish, it means too many letters” (HMS 10). A person’s name is another indicator of the importance of family and heritage in the Latino community, because it is the foremost identifier of an individual, as it carries with it ethnic and cultural signifiers (M. Johnson 66). Esperanza got her name from her great-grandmother, but as she states “I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (HMS 11) reflecting this way on how she chose a different life than her family, by moving away and going to college to be a writer and not some “lucrative” profession. Suggesting that each person is confined within a closed space, the house is a sign of oppression, often imposed on the Hispanic woman, but also symbolizes the American Dream of a better life which includes the notion of a better house (Szadziuk 115). The house is both a source of women’s confinement and the beginning of Esperanza’s conscious narrative reflection (Grobman 47).

Esperanza’s mother is really supportive of her daughter (unlike her father who objects to her career choice) and she does not try to impose any kind of a certain life path on her (“She knows what it is to live a life filled with regrets, and she doesn’t want her daughter to live that life too” [HMS xiv]). As a matter of fact, she supported her daughter’s projects as long as she goes to school (HMS xiv). This kind of relationship is completely different than a “typical” Mexican bringing up, where the domestic violence towards daughters was considered normal and acceptable (HMS 92). Furthermore, Esperanza’s mother demonstrates the failed attempts at breaking away from the community (Betz 27). For that reason, Esperanza views the mother role as a trapped position, for she must provide constant service to other people without fulfilling her own aspirations (Betz 27). A mother’s role is encouraging, as well as repressive, which reflects a double standard: an attempt to become integrated in the dominant, North American culture, which provides access to economic and social privileges, and on the other hand, an effort to preserve one’s own cultural identity by clinging to Hispanic traditions and stereotypes (Szadziuk 120). The feminine heritage emerges as the sphere of unfulfilled dreams and ambitions but also as an anchor, cherished and remembered (Szadziuk 122).

Although the narrator’s mother allows shame to torment her, Esperanza views her shame as a challenge to move beyond (Betz 28). As Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains: “Such a narrative is engaged with a maternal figure and ... is often compensatory for her lossesThe daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and

elaborate her mother's often thwarted talents" (93, qtd. in Doyle 10). Esperanza uses writing as an escape, although one cannot ever run away from who she is or where she comes from; "I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both hands. She sets me free" (HMS 110). Her writing has the power to transcend oppression both for herself and her female and ethnic community (Grobman 46). Esperanza finds a network of maternal figures in the extended filiations of her ethnic community, and she writes to celebrate all their unfulfilled talents and dreams and to compensate for their losses (Doyle 10). What is interesting, she doesn't use Spanish, rather her silence in this language is symbolic of Esperanza's ability to break out of this neighborhood and the larger culture that have the power to oppress her (Brunk 150). Through her writing, she will not inherit her mother's sadness and shame (Brunk 150). Mango Street may define her, but it does not limit her quest for emancipation (M. Johnson 61). Esperanza's "house of my own" simultaneously represents an escape from the barrio, a rejection of the domestic drudgery of "home", a solitary space for her creativity, and a communal expression of women's lives (Doyle 22). The intentional escape from Mango Street marks the growth of Esperanza's personal identity as an American (Betz 32).

3.2. CRISTINA GARCIA: *DREAMING IN CUBAN*

Written in 1992, the novel *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina Garcia follows the del Pino family and their way of migrating from a country shook up by a revolution. It is a drama of a family divided by Castro's takeover in Cuba in 1959 which becomes the central point of contention between mothers and daughters (Davis 61). The protagonists of this story are Celia del Pino and her two daughters Lourdes Puente and Felicia Villaverde with their families. Celia is considered to be the *materfamilias* and she is pulling all the strings. She has not left Cuba even in the times of the Revolution, but rather she has devoted the rest of her days to El Lider and in this way, she got a chance to participate in something larger than herself (*Dreaming in Cuban* [DC] 44). The Revolution brought many changes ("Fatherland or death!") to Cuba (DC 106). Before the revolution smart girls usually did not go to college, instead, they got married and had children while they were still children themselves (DC 121). What is more, Cuban women of a certain age and a certain class considered working outside the home to be beneath them (DC 130), but Celia del Pino was not a typical Cuban woman. Cuba in the 1970s has somewhat become "the joke of the Caribbean, a place where everything and everyone is for sale" (DC 164). Celia is alienated emotionally and politically from her first-born child, Lourdes, but she attempts to compensate for this through the psychic bond that she shares with Lourdes' daughter, Pilar (Tate 148).

To begin with, the women of the del Pino family all have strong, opinioned personalities, it's only that their beliefs vary. Celia believes in El Lider, the revolution and staying in Cuba, while her daughter Lourdes believes she "can fight communism from behind her bakery counter" (DC 136) in the U.S. where she migrated searching for better opportunities after traumatic experiences in Cuba (she lost a baby and was raped by the soldiers [DC 71]). Felicia is also in conflict with her mother when it comes to El Lider because she believes he is responsible for her husband Ernesto's death (DC 150). She also devoted herself to the voodoo gods which Celia strongly and openly discourages (DC 186).

Pilar Puente, Lourdes' daughter and Celia's first granddaughter, is very much like her grandmother. She is disdainful of rules, of religion, and of everything meaningful (DC 168). Their connection is even stronger because they write letters to

each other regularly. Pilar's living in Brooklyn and thus she primarily uses English, but when she writes to her grandmother she writes "in a Spanish that is no longer hers" (DC 7). To add to that, when Pilar visits Celia in Havana she starts dreaming in Spanish and "feels a change inside her" (DC 235). For this reason, Pilar also questions the American dream her mother is living with the bakery in the U.S. because her family was split into two halves which had nothing to say to each other (DC 137). The ancestors contribute to making Latina literature unquestionably female-centered and anchored in a Hispanic cultural tradition that praises motherhood (Norat 36). Daughters share a connection with their mothers, or a maternal figure, through whose influence they carry out an actual or figurative return to the family's ancestral land (Norat 46). The daughter's return to ancestral lands offers the possibility of reconciling with the mother and healing a relationship that has been strained on the U.S. mainland (Norat 47). The process of unearthing maternal and communal stories becomes an essential part of the process of self-identification, linked to the discovery of the mother and the mother's history, cultural possibilities, and choices (Davis 61).

Lourdes, on the other hand, considers herself lucky because she thinks that immigration has given her an opportunity to redefine herself, and for this reason, she is grateful (DC 73). Furthermore, she welcomes the adopted language, and its possibilities for reinvention and another point is that her success in America is a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba (DC 117). Resentment towards mothers is what connects all women and their children in this novel. Lourdes and Felicia resent her mother for the way she treated them, and their children hold grudges towards their mothers for similar reasons. Pilar cannot forgive her mother for the intrusions into her privacy (Lourdes read her diary, and beat her up after catching her during masturbation [DC 128]) and separating her from grandmother, while Felicia's twin daughters go as far as calling her "not-Mama" (DC 121). Nevertheless, Celia also harbors resentment towards her children. For example, she believes that her daughter Lourdes is cursed ("The baby lives on venom" [DC 50]). For this reason, she believes that only her granddaughter Pilar can save her, "guard her knowledge like the first fire" (DC 222). The family is marked by tragedies, the women suffer some sort of oppression, early and even later on in life, and they suffer from serious illnesses like breast cancer (Celia) and mental health disorder (Felicia). Lourdes and Pilar need to return to Cuba in order to come to terms with the tangled meanings of mothering,

language, and home, and renew their lives in the U.S. Pilar, as the protagonist, appropriates the foremother's voice and stories, to bring the cycle of generation and regeneration to completion (Davis 61). Cisneros even uses her last name "Puente" (translated as bridge) to highlight her role as a bridge between the place and the people of the past and the future (Davis 62). However, knowledge of a shared communication between Pilar and her grandmother serves to help reconstruct the matrilineal bond, forging the link with the mother country and its language as well (Davis 64).

In the end, Celia dies without her daughter coming to terms with her choices, and the relationship between Pilar and her mother remains problematic, though each has achieved insight into the other (Davis 67). When it comes to Pilar, by narrating as an acculturated daughter with command of English, the Latina authors herself into authority; she has gained control through her writing (Norat 48). The emphasis on relationships leads to a reevaluation of personal and communal tragedies that oblige the daughters to look back to the mothers, whose image and personality are often inseparable from community history and values (Davis 60). The daughter, hence, goes on a "psychological journey" to reach her own identity which demands a revision of the relationship with the mother (Davis 61).

3.3. EDWIDGE DANTICAT: *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY*

One of the countries whose political instability caused its citizens to migrate is Haiti. Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* first published in 1994 records the lives of four generations of women, and revolves primarily around a mother and daughter whose relationship is fraught with tension (Alexander 382). This conflict is exacerbated by the flight to America of the mother-protagonist, Martine Caco, after she was raped by a Tonton Macoute, one of Francis Duvalier's militia. However, across borders, traditional beliefs migrate, patriarchal culture persists through practice, and family secrets are revealed and challenged (Alexander 375).

Firstly, Haiti is a place where always some trouble happened; "This time it's crazy young people trying to fight the soldiers and government officials who would rather curse them with their last breath than give in to their protest" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* [BEM] 34). As a result, women especially have to suffer consequences and are not particularly seen as valuable or equal in society. Schooling is the only thing that makes people respect one (BEM 43). Thus, it does not come as a surprise that many people wanted to flee this kind of environment, even though it is not always done quite legally. Boat immigration is logically the most common one, but unfortunately, it often ends in a tragedy rather than with an opportunity to start a new life; "Thousands of people wash up on the shores. They put it on television, in newspaper" (BEM 99). The experience of the Haitian woman is defined by exile within her own country, for she is alienated from the means to assert feminine and feminist identities at the same time that she undergoes the same colonial experiences of her male counterparts (Myriam Chancy, qtd. in Watkins, 107). Because of that, the act of writing is restorative for Haitian women writers, insofar as it provides a "voice" for women who cannot speak for themselves (Watkins 108).

New York is famous for its Haitian community called "Little Haiti" (BEM 43). What makes immigration so appealing to people is the fact that "in Haiti, if your mother was a coal seller and you became a doctor, people would still look down on you knowing where you came from. But in America, they like success stories" (BEM 80). The family in the novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* consists of four generations of women: Sophie, her mother Martine, Tante Atie (Martine's sister), and their mother

Grandmè Ifé who pass down names and traditions, as well as their burdens, to the next in line (Watkins 106). A coming-of-age novel, it narrates a story of a young girl, Sophie Caco, who is left behind in Haiti as an infant when her mother Martine, migrates to the New York City, where she attempts to “escape the trauma” of her rape by a Tonton Macoute (Hewett 129). The novel also incorporates the multiple voices of other women and sympathetically portrays their experiences.

The oldest member of this matriarchate, Grandmè Ifé and the youngest, Sophie have a special connection, and furthermore, Grandmè gives her some advice about family; "Your mother is your first friend" (BEM 24). Grandmè Ifé also gives quite a big importance to tradition, no matter how invasive of a female body it is or how it affects her relationship with her daughters. This tradition is called “testing” and it means that the mothers insert a finger into the vaginas of their teenage daughters to check if they are still virgins because they believe that this will ensure the family's honor until they get married ("If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me" [BEM 156]). Grandmè would do this regularly to her daughters until Martine got raped by one of the Tonton Macoutes (soldiers of the state in Haiti whose dictator had U.S. support). This resulted in her pregnancy with Sophie. Having to suffer such trauma left a mark on Martine, and she decided to leave her with her sister, while she tried to make a better life for herself (and her daughter) in the United States. This is an example of a violence against women that contributes to the social control of women's sexuality and behavior and migration does not end this patriarchal practices, Martine's position in the New York Haitian diaspora does not provide her with an opportunity to free herself (or her daughter) from this abusive practice (Hewett 134).

Tante Atie, on the other hand, was the one who stayed and took care of their mother ("We are each going to our mothers. That is what was supposed to happen" [BEM 19]) as well as Sophie since she did not have children of her own. She raised Sophie and in a way protected her from the violent tradition, as she tells Sophie that she was never abandoned, but that she and her sister (Martine) had no control over anything, not even their own body (BEM 20). Atie becomes liberated through literacy, an intimate relationship with another woman, and the documenting of her family's history in the town's official records (Watkins 110).

Martine, despite fleeing Haiti, still keeps in touch by sending cassette tapes and money to her family and even goes so far as to have her adolescent daughter's move to America (BEM 40). Her main goal is to provide for her daughter a better life than she had; "You are going to work and here and no one is going to break your heart because you cannot read or write. You have a chance to become a kind of woman Atie and I have always wanted to be" (BEM 44). Much like other immigrant groups, Haitians also believe that their second generation is the one that will "save" them; "If you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can raise our heads" (BEM 44). One interesting contradiction here is the fact that Martine wants her daughter to move away from her way of life by sending her to school and providing her with the things she never had, but on the other hand, she is also testing her daughter, thus keeping this violent tradition present even in the U.S. Sophie says: "The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure" (BEM 61). Martine tests her daughter weekly in an attempt to reclaim her own virginity through her daughter (Watkins 116). She also struggles with self-hatred and her own failure to live up to the ideals of womanhood and not being an ideal mother (Hewett 132). However, she does not want patriarchal views on woman's professions to restrict her daughter from becoming a doctor, although she never really asks Sophie what she wants (Mehni 88).

Sophie and her mother have a rather difficult relationship because Sophie is not familiar with the whole (hi)story and basically does not really know her mother. She finds out about her mother's rape only after her mother screams during the night because she is having nightmares. Those nightmares also made her so desperate that she tried to kill herself a couple of times when Sophie was a baby (BEM 139). One of the reasons their relationship is so complicated is that Martine is reminded of her tragic past by Sophie's face; "A child out of wedlock always looks like its father" (BEM 61). What makes this whole situation ironic, is that Martine, despite being aware how the rape ruined and marked her life, still points out that there was a positive outcome: "The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day" (BEM 170). Martine's life is defined by silence since she limits her own interaction with other humans, which is a result of being trapped in her rape trauma (Sarhou 106). Haitian families internalize and regularize that silence, perpetuating it as tradition and shutting off the possibility for

individuals to mediate the traumatic consequences (Sarhou 107). Martine finally finds resolution through suicide.

Sophie, the narrator and the focal point of this *Bildungsroman*, is the one who had to deal with the consequences. It is clear that she was scared of meeting her mother and leaving Haiti, but she nevertheless managed to “accept the new life. I greeted the challenge, like one greets a new day. As my mother’s daughter and Tante Atie’s child” (BEM 49). Until this point in time, Sophie was somewhat protected – both from the tradition and from the truth about her father. Although Sophie was a second-generation immigrant, and despite the fact that her mother hated the testing tradition, Martine still decided to check regularly on her daughter’s honor. This, of course, led to Sophie’s protest in the form of her own self-violation with a pestle so that her mother would stop testing her (BEM 88). The inheritor of her mother’s traumatic memories, both as a witness to Martine’s frequent nightmares and through her own subjection to testing, Sophie suffers from an eating disorder and inability to enjoy sexual intimacy due to her failed efforts to reconcile with the past (Watkins 111). Her own struggle to find healing and self-acceptance ultimately leads her to return to Haiti and spend time with her aunt and grandmother (Hewett 129). In her therapy sessions, Sophie re-tells her history and her feelings towards her mother (what she thought about during the process of testing), towards her husband (how she could barely let him touch her) and how her body will always “contain the memory of testing” (BEM 169). In that way, she speaks also for Martine, becoming the voice for her mother as she shares how Martine’s assault unfolded (Watkins 112). However, unlike Martine, Sophie is showing quite a progress, because she uses therapy to become a better version of herself; “I was not angry with her anymore. I had a greater need to understand, so that I would never repeat it myself” (BEM 170). This is a very important sentence because it marks the break with the Haitian tradition. Since it is a novel about growth, Sophie comes to terms with what her mother did to her (“I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too” [BEM 203]) and even pities her mother (BEM 208). She managed to find an alternative way forward, with the help of Erzulie – a figure who contains the power to set women free from the gendered ideologies and practices that confine them (Hewett 133).

In the end, the women in Haiti have a special bond in their families, but not only to themselves but also to the island itself: “Listening to the song, I realized that it was neither my mother nor my Tante Atie who had given all the mother-and-daughter motifs to all stories they told and all the songs they sang. It was something that was essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of this land” (BEM 230). However, leaving Haiti gives Sophie access to the liberating influences of the U.S. where people can speak their minds openly and freely (Sarthou 107). Sophie addresses her shame so that it is not passed down to her own daughter (Watkins 124). Through reclaiming powerful Haitian figures of motherhood and rewriting oppressive scripts of womanhood, Sophie escapes the cycle of trauma and finds the freedom never available to her own mother (Hewett 129).

4. ARAB AMERICAN ETHNIC WRITING

Arab-American women writers have focused on expanding their exploration of the conjunctions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and politics in recent writing (Suhair Majaj). A great deal of literature by and about Muslim immigrants has been written during the last few decades, which comes as a result of a cultural climate that hungers for insight into Muslim communities and Islam itself (Abdurraquib 55). According to Lisa Suhair Majaj, Arab-American literature is in essence “Arabic writing in English”, while the second point of view is that Arab-American identity is basically an American identity articulated in relationship to U.S. ethnicity and within the framework of the “multicultural”, and it is the role of Arab-American literature to reflect this identity. Authors choose between depictions of assimilation, acculturation, or cultural hybridity. When literature focuses on religion, religion is treated as a cultural element that needs to be left behind because it does not correlate with being American (Abdurraquib 56). While it would be expected that Arab-American literature would be predominately concerned with the post 9/11 events, it is not always the case. The common denominator in Muslim literature is educating non-Muslim audiences about Islam (Gana 1578).

Women are often “assigned the role of bearers of cultural values, carriers of traditions, and symbols of the community”, meaning that women are often “compelled to assume the burden of the reproduction of the group” (Moghadam, qtd. in Abdurraquib 56). However, since they are usually veiled, this symbolic otherness of Muslim immigrant women keeps them in a liminal position in the society to which they migrate (Abdurraquib 57). Because veiling is translated as “ethnic dress”, women have a problem of negotiating Muslim immigrant identity in an American context (Abdurraquib 62). When it comes to literature which deals with those topics, it has to move outside of both the stereotypical forms and content of Muslim immigrant writing. Literature which embraces both veiling and embraces Americanness challenges the expectations of immigrant Muslim literature (Abdurraquib 68). Other than that, its role is to challenge commonplace perceptions of the Middle East, Muslim women, and Arab Americans (Baer and Glasgow 26). Third-wave feminism establishes itself upon new sensitivities to the difference not only with regard to the

function of sex and gender but also with regard to differences among women (Seedat 28). Consequently, Islamic feminism is constructed as a necessary outcome of Muslim women's feminist aspirations, a claim to render gender through struggles in Islam equivalent with gender struggles represented by historical feminism (Seedat 42).

Mohja Kahf is an example of a Muslim-American feminist who is centrally concerned with self-questioning and the relationships within the family, but also the communities of Arab or rather Muslim immigrants in the United States.

4.1. MOJHA KAHF: *THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF*

The year 2001 marked the United States' history as well as it sealed the fate both of any future immigrants, as well as the ones already living in America. Written in 2006, Mohja Kahf's novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a story about a Syrian family living in Midwestern America (Indiana), and focusing on how this location marked the lives of the second-generation, and the challenges those children of immigrants had to face while growing up as members of the "unwanted" minority. The novel begins with describing the childhood of four Muslim children in Alabama – two Arab and two black in the middle of the 1970s (*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* [GTS] 5). The Muslim community had its sort of a headquarters – the Dawah Center. It was used for Muslims who wanted to learn Islam better, to teach it to their children, to build Mosques, etc. (GTS 14). Khadra Shamy, the protagonist of this novel, is nurtured by a tight-knit, cosmopolitan community of Muslim aunties and uncles, comprising African Americans, Arabs, South Asians, and Cambodians (Bose 90). Much like other minorities, the Arab Americans put great importance on religion and education about religion. What is important to mention is that women had one specific role in particular: "That is her most important work: making more Muslims. Good-quality Muslims, that is. An educated mother is the child's first school" (GTS 21). In that way, the emphasis on the relationship between a mother and her children is established, as well as the importance of a family (they believed that the approval of parents is "next to God's" [GTS 139]) and the feeling of closeness. This trait differentiates them from the Americans, because "Americans believed the individual was more important than the family, and money was more important than anything" (GTS 68). Furthermore, this similarity and difference with Americans are put in the forefront because it is also the cause of some division among the Muslim community.

On one hand, there are those who dislike the American way of life: "Americans hardly ever sit on the floor. Their bodies forget to pray after sitting up stiffly at the tables and desks, working to gain the wealth and glitter of this world" (GTS 34). On the other hand, there are those who support the idea of becoming more American: "At the same time, there are those who want the organization to outgrow its immigrant founders and their 'back-home' concerns, and to become more American" (GTS 47). Another important characteristic is the so-called "Islamic consciousness" (GTS 77)

which refers once again to the importance of religion in everyday life, and also it gives somewhat critical perspective about the religion itself, thus stating its pros but also its cons as well; “Islam is scientific. Not like Christianity. Islam, it encourages us to learn science” (GTS 120). An example of faultiness: “No racism in Islam. But it was also a smokescreen of denial that retarded any real attempt to deal with the prejudices that existed among Muslims” (GTS 137). Furthermore, a good thing which Islam promoted was the “lowering the gaze or in other words, showing the men’s modesty in front of women” (GTS 182).

The novel is narrated through the voice of Khadra, “olive-skinned, dark-haired young woman” who spent her growing-up years in Indiana (GTS 1). Her parents are strongly connected to their local Muslim community, and consequently so is she. In addition, she found consolation in practicing religion; “The strong vibrations of the men’s voices and the murmurs of the women made her feel safe. Sandwiched between them, she was right where she belonged” (GTS 33). This, however, did not protect her from the discrimination from her fellow students: “Maybe she belonged in a place where she would not get shoved and called ‘raghead’ every other day in the school” (GTS 97). As already mentioned, she was focused on practicing and studying religion, which lead her to become an “Islamic warrior woman” (GTS 141) and “Islamic radicalism was her James Dean” (GTS 152). This happened during her teenage, rebellious years when she starts wearing a black hijab (GTS 157). Khadra’s black veil is an expression for hating America and a willingness to attack it (Khalifeh 157). What is more, she becomes aware of the impact that religion has on their lives because she says that “her father raised her to go out and learn, but deep down he still wants her to be like his mother” (GTS 246).

On the other hand, Khadra’s relationship with her own mother is different, because her mother opposed the Americanization of her children, while Khadra wanted to explore her opportunities. Ebtehaj (the mother) was very strict and religious and claimed that “Americans didn’t care about impurities” (GTS 4). Her somewhat extreme conception of Islam was also visible when it came to relationships with other women, and especially men: “This unnerved Khadra’s mother. If she could be sure it was the woman, she’d invite her in, but if it was the man, she’d stay behind the screen door and be careful not to touch his hand when she took the bowl” (GTS 7). Khadra, since she was raised to question and rethink everything, thought that she needs to “find

out about her mother's secrets and understand her story to go on with her own" (GTS 276). Khadra went to Syria to restore her sense of self, where she found out that she is much more similar to her mother than she taught. Ebtehaj received a college degree under a secular Ba'athist government and dreamt of going to medical school, but later gives up that dream in order to perform her perceived duties as a wife and mother (Abumelhim 30). As long as she worked at the Dawah Center without getting paid, it doesn't contradict the traditional gender role (Abumelhim 30).

While visiting Saudi Arabia, Khadra discovered that women were not allowed to pray in the mosque. Despite her mother's strictness, her parents managed to "transfer" to her the value of their culture; "And she wanted her heart to remember, in the dappled ruffle and rustle of veiling and unveiling, how precious is the heritage! A treasure fire cannot eat" (GTS 313). Nevertheless, Khadra had a phase of her life where she completely excluded herself from the community, but it led her to a conclusion where she realized that her life was not so bad after all; "...when she began to feel that her prized, newfound solitude and the sweet relief of being outside the shell of a tight-knit community had a sliver of loneliness that came with it" (GTS 328). She was seen too Muslim by the Americans, and too American and too feminist by her community and her husband (Khalifeh 158). The decision on the divorce and the abortion are signs of Khadra's knowledge of the Islamic teachings and a realization of her rights within the Islamic discursive tradition (Majid 225). By doing so, she refused to do the traditional feminine tasks as gaining knowledge (getting a college education) seemed much more important to her (Khalifeh 158). A trip to the homeland (Syria) challenges the religious orthodoxy of her youth and helps to solidify her burgeoning feminism (Bose 90). She became aware of her identity through the characters of the women of her family (Khalifeh 158).

Finally, taking all these things into consideration, she decided to "break with the program, in the end" (GTS 440). This led to the fulfillment of her mother's biggest fear: "losing our children to America" (GTS 384). Ultimately, this is a story about the problems of negotiating Muslim immigrant identity in an American context (Abdurraquib 62). Khadra's changes in her Islamic consciousness necessarily entail realigning her understanding of American identity and Kahf manages to successfully decenter dominant American narratives about geopolitics by describing Arab perceptions and reactions to an all-too-muscular and imperial foreign policy (Bose 91).

5. CONCLUSION

Women's immigration history started to be more recognized in American historical scholarship only in the second half of the 20th century. Because of the changes in the U.S. politics which lead to the growing immigration of East and South Asians, Latin Americans and the immigrants from the Caribbean, the focus was now on the themes of transnationalism and gendered assimilation. Immigrant women played the most important role in establishing and surviving of immigrant communities, as well as passing on the culture. The United States served as a land of opportunity for most immigrant women because of the second wave of feminism which happened during the last quarter of the 20th century, and which provided women with better rights than in their homelands. Since the scholars did not take much of this into consideration, female novelists are crucial for understanding the situation of these women and their experiences. The literature written by and about immigrant women provides an insight into the families and the changes which happened as a consequence of migration. Particularly, the analysis of mother-daughter relationship is used as an example because it includes both family ties and gender issues. Deleuze and Guattari use a phrase minor literature to describe the literature written by minorities (Asians, Caribbean people, Arabs, Latinos) but in a major language, which in this case is the English language. In that way, minority writers bring more attention to the marginal literature but also make it understandable to a wide range of people.

Asian American ethnic literature analyzed through *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston and *Bone* by Fae Myenne Ng gives the reader a picture of Chinese tradition which the immigrants brought with them. Chinese families are especially interesting since they were under a lot of restrictions for a long time (daughters were sold and considered less valuable than male children). The novels are characterized by some elements of the past such as memoirs, myths, folktales, and talk-stories. Both novels describe the oppressed position of girls within the Chinese community, they even go as far as considering a family with three daughters (*Bone*) as a sign of bad luck. The feminist aspects are visible in the mother who in one case, used the money to educate herself in the U.S. and provide for her daughter a better life that she had, and in the other case, the mother also made great sacrifices and endured

humiliation of the Chinese American community, also to provide for her daughters. The mothers use stories to teach their daughters about the tradition but since they are growing up in a totally different surrounding, it is often the case that those daughters refuse to follow the tradition. Both mothers suffered a loss of children, as well as tragic deaths of female members of the family which was considered as bringing shame to the family and never spoken of. Mothers and daughters share a mutual feeling of guilt because mothers would do anything to give their daughters better chances in their new, American lives, while daughters are aware of the sacrifices their mothers made so they feel responsible for their unhappiness. What is more, the daughters in both novels are helping the people in their communities to adapt easier to the American way of life, since they are a second-generation of immigrants and thus more easily adapted to the new situation.

The Caribbean island writing, combined with a Mexican perspective give a slightly different perspective. Their ideals of motherhood and women were shaped by colonization, and their migration is characterized by violent political situations which forced them to find a refuge. Mostly agricultural societies, they do not have a problem with finding jobs in the U.S. nor did they suffer any significant restrictions since the 1980s. *The House on Mango Street* tells a story about the differences between the Mexican and American societies through the voice of a young Latina girl. The family is one of the most important things in Latino communities. Unlike typical Mexican mothers (or in this case, also Chinese mothers), the mother in this novel is supportive of her daughter and does not try to impose any kind of lifestyle or choice on her. Furthermore, Cuban and Haitian perspectives share more similarities. Both novels (*Dreaming in Cuban* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*) talk about the families which migrated from troubled countries. The political regimes were especially cruel to women who were often victims of rape committed by members of the militia. The Caribbean island communities also share the same matriarchal families, meaning that the mothers were the most respected members of families. Mothers and daughters have tight relationships but also grandmothers and granddaughters, as seen in the novels written by a Haitian and a Cuban author. Those relationships only change if one of the members immigrates. A specific set of (political) circumstances often makes the mothers migrate to America, and leave their children with the grandmothers until they make enough money to bring them as well. There is also often violence

involved, like in the case of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* where the mothers do “testing” to their daughters to make sure that they will marry as virgins, otherwise they bring disgrace to the family. Sometimes, this tradition makes the daughters do self-harm in order for it to stop. Unlike Chinese daughters, the Caribbean daughters do not feel guilty, rather they become resentful as a result of their abandonment and the treatment they get or do not get from their mothers. However, they also believe that the United States is a land of opportunities and gives them the possibility to reinvent their identity. Although the immigrant women do make a better life for themselves, they still consider the second generation as the one who will save them, thus special emphasis is put on getting a good education. One thing immigrant women seem to have in common are mental or physical illnesses, which are connected to the migration because the causes for deteriorating mental health conditions stem from the violent experiences which happened in the homeland.

Arab-American writing and identity are based largely on the religion (Islam in the case of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*) which can be treated as a separate culture. Consequently, family and the community play the most important parts of the lives of children. The daughters in all of these novels are provided with a better access to education, which is made possible by moving to the United States. Another trait which comes with this move is that the second-generation has now the freedom of expression to tell the stories about their mothers who did not have a voice of their own, but by immigrating they showed an initiative which they passed on to their daughters.

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7. ABSTRACT

The last quarter of the 20th century and onwards has been marked by a massive immigration wave to the United States. Almost half of that immigrant population is comprised of women, which is the reason why the field of women's immigration history in the U.S. plays a particularly important role. Accordingly, the increased attention to women has also given rise to women's fiction writing dealing with the issues of immigration, family and gender roles. Because of the changes in U.S. politics which lead to the growing immigration of East and South Asians, Latin Americans and the immigrants from the Caribbean, the focus was now on the themes of transnationalism and gendered assimilation. Immigrant women played the most important role in establishing and maintaining immigrant communities, as well as passing on the culture. The United States served as a land of opportunity for most immigrant women who could profit from the second wave of feminism evolving since the last quarter of the 20th century, and which provided women with more rights and opportunities than in their homelands. Aside from scholarly interpretations, female ethnic novelists are crucial for understanding the situation of these women and their experiences. These narratives show greater fluidity of identity and hybridity within the second-generation of immigrants. Focused primarily on the matrilineal lines in the families, the authors write about the storytelling as a means of transferring tradition to children and keeping the history alive despite immigration, about the newly found freedom to express themselves (writing in particular) and the end of violent traditions and practices on women's bodies, as well as about access to quality education. In order to analyze the intersection of these issues, the works of following writers have been used: Chinese American authors Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*) and Fae Myenne Ng (*Bone*), as well as the Mexican American author Sandra Cisneros (*The House on Mango Street*), Cuban American author Cristina Garcia (*Dreaming in Cuban*), Haitian American author Edwidge Danticat (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*), and Syrian American author Mohja Kahf (*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*).

KEYWORDS:

Immigrant women, the immigrant family, ethnic writing, minor literature, feminism.