

# Mythical heroines : the appropriation of myth in reconstructing female identities in ethnic American literature

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Mythical Heroines: The Appropriation of Myth in Reconstructing Female  
Identities in Ethnic American Literature

INTRODUCTION

David Adams Leeming, in *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero*, asserts that “the journey of life is the search for the self—for the personal myth which is veiled in the local and the immediate but which, on a deeper level, is but an expression of the world myth” (6). This essay will explore the ways in which female characters in ethnic American feminist literature appropriate myths in negotiating the reconstruction of their individual identities, and by extension their own personal search for the self. In the first place, the notion of an essential nature of “woman” is itself a myth, as expounded by Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. The position of the characters I will be focusing on as female figures from marginalized societies makes their doubly oppressed status a complex one to examine, especially in relation to their chosen tools of survival, in this case, the appropriation of myths. I will explore their modes of appropriation through the nature of the myths themselves, and how these myths can become enablers yet also hindrances in helping these characters gain empowerment.

The three literary texts being investigated along these lines are Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. In an essay on Third World women’s feminist politics, Chandra Mohanty

defines the third world through “geographical location as well as particular sociohistorical conjunctures” thus, incorporating “so-called minority peoples or people of colour in the U.S.A” (2). By Mohanty’s definition, all three texts can therefore be categorized as texts that depict third world feminism. The three texts selected represent different cultural backgrounds and demonstrate not only the variety of cultural myths but also the differences within the protagonists’ own negotiations with their cultural heritage. In investigating the dynamics between myth and these women, we will also look at the necessity of a collective experience in constructing a selfhood. The survival of myths across generations and cultures relies on the upholding or passing on of these myths. Thus myths exist and continue to exist only in the presence of a compliant society. Myths, therefore, do not exist separate from communities, and what this paper will eventually show is that even as these female characters employ myths in their own individual acts of identity reconstruction, they do so with the collective effort from more than just their inner selves. Why do these female characters look towards myths through the re-imaging of goddesses, women warriors, supernatural manifestations, and spirits in the construction of a self? Perhaps they do so in order to compensate for the innate sense of deficiency that they have been programmed with, and to seek a greater power outside of themselves. For each female character that we dissect, we will find that her appropriations of myth take on different aspects and eventually lead to diverse outcomes, some positive and some counter-effective. We will also see how these myths are channelled into the lives of the women in question. Gender-based cultural myths and legends are transmitted via talk-story, the childhood realm, and inherited history. In all three texts, the main characters display fragmentation of selves and sometimes a fusing of several characters, or in the case of *Jasmine*, the embodiment of many selves within one

body. The female characters tap into these myths in order to construct viable identities for themselves in order to fight against patriarchy, marginalization, and erasure.

For Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the central myth that is woven into the protagonist's psyche is that of the swordswoman, Fa Mu Lan, whose legend seeps into the character of the mother Brave Orchid as well as the protagonist, who appropriates this myth in her own manner, whereby her pen is her sword. The other "mythic" figure from her Chinese culture is Tsai Yen the poetess. This paper will examine the various myths that are funnelled into the protagonist's psyche, and will track the ways in which the protagonist taps into these myths to gain empowerment and how these myths also inhibit her in her struggle to construct a self straddled between her two cultures, that of being both Chinese and American. What is integral to the legend of Fa Mu Lan is the blurring of gender dichotomies that she represents, thus attempting to subvert patriarchy to some extent.

In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the motif of the goddess Kali features greatly as Jasmine continuously reinvents herself, often in the image of the self-sacrificial female goddess, as if inviting tragedy into her life. The manner in which she attempts to don "American-ness" can be said to be a different kind of myth, perhaps a desire for a brighter future in a new land, vast with opportunity. As with Kingston's text, *Jasmine* is concerned with the ways in which the protagonist is bound to the myths of her culture, even as she negotiates her new status in her new land and fights for her own survival. Nevertheless it ends in slightly less triumphant tones than *The Woman Warrior*, as Jasmine fastens herself to an American white male to find her happiness, thereby relegating herself to the exotic definition that is expected of her.

Morrison's *Beloved* taps into a more nebulous figuration of the idea of myth—

Myth in the form of the supernatural that inhabits No 124— and eventually it is the supernatural “rebirth” of *Beloved* that is the catalyst for Sethe’s reconstruction of self and her identity. *Beloved* jogs the “re-memory” that helps Sethe re-claim ownership of her freed self in daring to love and trust another human being.

#### A WORKING DEFINITION OF MYTH

To begin, we must first demarcate what we are referring to when we talk about myth. Myth is commonly defined as a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events (McKean). Leeming takes this definition further when he says:

Myth comes via *mythos* from the greek root (*mu*) meaning to make a sound with the mouth and is thus basic to human existence as we know it: *In the beginning there was the Word*. To the orthodox believer what we call myth is the word of God—the metaphorical, symbolical, or direct expression of the “unknown”: “and the Word was with God, and the word was God.

(Leeming 3)

Implicit in his expounder is the sense that within the concept of myth lays the notion of beginnings and/or foundations. Leeming also quotes Campbell in his book:

“Campbell has written, ‘when scrutinized in terms not of what is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age’” (5). Hence what I will include as embodiments of myth will straddle between the explicit definition above as well as the more dynamic qualities that myth has, as purported by Leeming. C.G Jung writes:

The primitive mentality does not invent myths, it experiences them. Myths are original revelations of the pre-conscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings [...]. The point is not to search for the physical or historical correlative of myth, but for the meaning, which is intrinsic in the myth itself, for myths like dreams are physically real. (qtd in Leeming 5)

And so, even as we examine the myths that figure in the texts, we too search for the meaning intrinsic in myth itself, for as Leeming purports, “the [source of myths] is the universal soul of the human race itself” (Leeming 5) and is crucial to the reconstruction of self, which the female protagonists in question undertake. Having said that, I wish to assert that myth can be deemed as the intersection between fiction and history. This is especially clear of the Fa Mulan myth, as it is for what Beloved stands for. Situating myth in this position makes it clearer for our explorations of myth within the texts at hand.

#### BATTLING WITH THE MYTH OF THE WOMAN WARRIOR

Motifs of narrative, re-telling, and reconstructions of identity amidst violent histories recur in all three texts, and especially in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. In this text, it is a feminist tradition to pass on the heritage of story, talk-story, and myths; hence the maternal relationship is key to the return to the body and the finding of a self, and this circularity will be elaborated on later. The women in the text exhibit the lashing out against injunctions to silence, and find a voice to articulate their individual histories as representative of a collective, allowing the multiplicity of narratives to make way for an eventual separation and re-construction of singular,

whole identities. In doing so, they regain authorship and possession of their own bodies.

The narrative of *The Woman Warrior* is a melding together of autobiography, myth, talk-story and history, and even from a metatextual point of view, Kingston's text in its structure serves to mimic the journey of the protagonist negotiating with the many sources of history that she (Maxine) finds herself a part of. Her act of transcribing and attempting to reinscribe her own Chinese-American identity alongside the many stories that are "funneled" (Kingston 21) into her ears is summed up when she says, "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (Kingston 5-6). In other words, Maxine attempts to sift through fact and fiction, in order to unearth authenticity. In her essay about "Gender vs. Ethnicity" in the novel, Linda Hunt points out how Kingston's *Woman Warrior* forces us to pay attention to "the contradictions male dominance creates for women who are at one and the same time subordinated by a culture, and yet embroiled in its interstices" as "such women may be painfully at odds with themselves" (5). Hunt's statement hints at how Kingston's dilemma as portrayed through her protagonist is not only of one entanglement between cultures, but also of one oppressed by a traditional culture in a new land that upholds patriarchy to a fault. While the novel begins with an injunction to silence, it continues with the mother imparting the story of the tragic "No-Name Woman" who is Maxine's scandalized aunt, victimized by patriarchal dominion. The aunt is found to be pregnant out of wedlock, and then scorned and ostracized by her community. Not only does the no-name aunt commit spiteful suicide, she is also denied a legacy

by being erased from her family history. Kingston however, avenges this aunt by including her tale in the novel and exploring her potential justifications for her actions. Perhaps it is the brutal erasure of this aunt and the silence that is attributed to her tale that spurs Maxine on to find her own voice. Kingston also situates the next image of woman, namely the Fa Mu Lan figure, as the antithesis or answer to the tragedy of the no-name aunt. Enter the eponymous myth or legend that is implied in the title of *The Woman Warrior*: the legend of Fa Mu Lan. Hunt suggests that Kingston's purpose in juxtaposing the "outlaw aunt" with an "exploration of the legend of Fa Mu Lan is to "test whether her culture's myth about a heroic woman who defends her village will provide a way for Kingston to transcend the degrading female social role, and yet be loyal to the community" (7).

Nevertheless, Kingston's rewriting of the Fa Mu Lan tale has come under severe criticism from critics. Feng Lan, in his essay historicizing Mulan and Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, has stated that "critics of Kingston's revision deny it any historical grounding because they find in it only *distortions of the histories of China and Chinese America*" (229). For our purposes though, I am unwilling to criticize the authenticity of the Mulan tale when told through Kingston's protagonist, for it is the act of revisioning and re-appropriating according to Maxine's (the character) needs that makes the myth a potent yet malleable force in the construction of her individual identity, and a means of transcendence. Feng Lan's essay historicizes the Mulan legend and delineates the ways in which it has resurfaced with varying emphasis, usually in accordance with a political agenda, where Mulan's sacrifice for nation and country exemplify the doctrine of "*sangang* or *the three cardinal guides*, namely, monarch guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife" (233). This doctrine, enforced under the rule of the Tang Empire, and elsewhere no doubt,



“legitimize[s] both patriarchal hierarchy and the authority of its rulers” (Feng 233). So for Kingston’s protagonist, the essence of the Mulan myth, while empowering to some degree, is problematic to her inquisitive, searching mind when trying to come to terms with social and cultural expectations.

It is Maxine’s mother who imparts the stories of Mulan to her, and as we know “whenever she had to warn us about life, [her] mother told stories [...] to grow up on. She tested [her] strength to establish realities” (Kingston 5). Also, in the beginning of the “White Tigers” section of the novel, Maxine tells us that as a Chinese girl she “learned that [she] failed if she grew up to be but wives or slaves when she [and other chinese girls] could be “heroines, swordswomen” (Kingston 20). Even as Maxine’s mother has said that she would “grow up a wife and a slave” her mother has also “taught her the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan” (Kingston 20). Perhaps this song is meant to be more of an anthem of transcendence in the face of oppression, like a lullaby to soothe her anxieties and not so much an actual stirring to a greater destiny. Deborah Homsher, however, purports that “Passed through generations, the Fa Mu Lan chant is “impersonal” or “suprapersonal”; it has gained an existence and a form of its own, and speaking brings it life (97). In this sense, the myth can in fact be life giving, and living by it provides a means of survival. The Fa Mu Lan in Kingston’s tale takes her father’s place in war, as do all other versions of Mulan, since that is the basis of the legend. She fights valiantly and saves her nation, and in this version, she is trained for fifteen years in preparation of the day when she would fulfil her destiny. In her training she has two mentors, one man and a woman, and this already hints at the utopian notion of equality between genders. Before Mulan sets out to war, her parents carve revenge on her back, so that even in the event of death her dead body would act as a “weapon” (Kingston 34). This recasting of the

legend that utilizes the power of writing as a weapon is later to become more relevant to Maxine, who becomes a writer and who then reinscribes this legend in her writing.

I want to suggest that just as the process of inscribing revenge on Mulan's back involved the shedding of blood, so does Maxine's later articulations of her own experiences involve a different sort of violence. Perhaps the process of articulation, and of avenging one's self through articulation, does entail pain, whether physical or emotional.

Mulan's victory for her village and her nation indicates the capacity for women to be warriors, and victorious ones at that, despite the subjugation and myth of inferiority that women everywhere are prone to. Since Kingston's Mulan managed to bear a child while out travelling from battle to battle, we are also forced to admit to the versatility and strength of women in finding the ability to play both male and female roles. Empowering as this version of woman is, in the end after serving her "public duties" Mulan returns to a life set out for her, of "farmwork and housework" and of "bearing sons" (Kingston 45). While seeming to proffer radical developments for gender politics, this particular myth eventually collapses and returns to being another semblance of oppression. In itself, the myth or legend of Fa Mu Lan, while empowering to some extent, is nonetheless an essentially patriarchal tale and it is in Kingston's appropriation of it that she sheds some of the inherently patriarchal aspects of it. While Mulan's sense of roots is irrefutably strong, Maxine "could not figure out what was [her] village" (Kingston 47). Maxine also struggles to get out of "hating range". This hate that oppresses her comes from external sources, merely because 1) she is a girl and 2) she is a Chinese in America (Kingston 52). In conflating her story with that of Mulan's she says:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are *report a crime* and *report to five families*. The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words—*chink* words and *gook* words too—that they do not fit on my skin. (Kingston 53)

While Mulan employs her swords, Maxine employs her pen or her voice in exacting revenge and in coming to terms with who she is or even in transcending her pre-ordained fate. Maxine's weapon of writing takes on her own unique voice and can now reinscribe the myths that have been passed down to her according to her own appropriations of them. Maxine, however, does not conform to gender roles of becoming wife and mother in the way that Mulan does. In the novel, Maxine does not marry or bear children. She does become a writer, and if we were to view the text as autobiographical, then she does rehash the tales of Chinese tradition and culture and lashes out against the injustice inherent in some of these tales. Leslie Rabine, in her essay on social gender, purports that "the myths that nourish the imagination and the spirit also relegate women to an inferior position: and limits them to a role of serving men, and hinders their growth" (478). Maxine, towards the end of the novel, displays some of this sense of being hampered and bogged down by myths and tales that are supposed to assist in one's formation of identity. Maxine says to her mother, "I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories" (Kingston 202). Nevertheless, they serve as cultural fodder for Maxine's development in her journey of self-actualization. While the myth comes to her in a hegemonic form, sanctioning conformity to the social order, Maxine in

dealing with the Mulan myth adds her own rebellious perspective to it and by adapting it, also challenges the social order.

When we assess the appropriation of the Mulan myth, we instantly position Maxine against Mulan, but in many ways her mother, Brave Orchid, also appropriates the woman warrior legend and exemplifies some of the swordswoman's traits, of courage and formidability and of competence in a male-dominated realm, when she becomes a doctor. When we see how Maxine taps into myths not only of Mulan but also of all the tales that Brave Orchid strings together and imparts onto Maxine, we see how Maxine weaves her own identity out of the many threads of stories that she is given. We can then surmise that just as the concept of myth exists only in the presence of a collective audience or of a community, so does the appropriation of myth as exemplified by Maxine here occur only in the presence of more than just one single individual. That is to say that even as the myths came to Maxine mostly through her mother, so does she attempt to incorporate them into her life either as positive or negative influences only in conjunction with her mother. While the focus of the journey through her ambivalent psyche seems to be a solitary one, Maxine's journey is intricately linked to stories of her mother, and aunts. In her essay on *The Woman Warrior*, Wendy Ho argues, "the psychic bonding between mother and daughter through gender, socialization as women, and talk-story tradition is used to work through and express the new psychic landscape of the Chinese-American daughter-writer in America" (quoted in Yuan Shu 204). Hence, it is the sharing of talk-story, and Maxine's and her mother's individual interpretations of the myths that encircle their lives, that enable our protagonist to slowly piece together her own sense of self and the forming of an independent identity. This eventual identity that she arrives at is one that does not simply mimic any of the legends or tales that she is fed,

but one that negotiates an entirely separate being founded on her own individual values, that nevertheless incorporates some of the elements of the myths that leads her to any conclusive notion of self. It is of course an on-going process, and in the novel Maxine says, “I continue to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (Kingston 205). In other words, she continues to sift through the myths, which may be particular to her individual experiences, her culture, her family, and the ones, that Leeming terms as bits of a “world myth” (6).

In the final section of the novel, “Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Maxine displays her newfound claim to possession of her own voice when she refers to her mother and says, “The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (Kingston 206). She incorporates a new myth at this ending, the one of the singing poetess T’sai Yen. The essence of this myth can be inferred to suggest a peaceful assimilation of cultures that “translates well” (Kingston 209). There is great symbolism in this ending, where the utopia of a peaceful co-existence of contrasting cultures prevails. It boasts of an ideal that Ruppel champions in his essay, a “hopeful imaging of a postcolonial world where difference is acknowledged and history is reconfigured” (188). Our protagonist who has received so many tales and myths in her lifetime finds that she can now construct her own myths to live by and to pass on through her writing.

#### FINDING THE GODDESS WITHIN IN *JASMINE*

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* displays a different set of dynamics through which the female protagonist negotiates with and appropriates myth in her journey of self-discovery. The Jyoti-Jasmine-Kali-Jase-Jane figure is at different points of the

diegesis wanting both to protect and to shun inherent relationships with myth. The most concrete extrapolation of myth in *Jasmine* is in Jasmine's appropriation of the Hindu goddess Kali that occurs at what I would say is the climax of the novel, simply because it unleashes a whole new level of agency within the character, and unravels her inner psyche. But beyond the obvious imaging of the mythic goddess, Jasmine is also the embodiment of a collective myth of the exotic Asian female held by many, as exemplified by Half-Face (the American who eventually rapes her) and even Bud Ripplemeyer (the American banker who wants to marry her), though in different degrees. This second myth of self-identity is one that Jasmine naturally enacts even as she simultaneously strives to cleave herself from it. The third myth that figures in *Jasmine* is that of the dream of America within her psyche and the prospects of a First World country. This simultaneous friction and magnetisation that Jasmine experiences with myth is to be explored in conjunction with the other prevalent themes of the text, namely violence, memory, and identity.

Timothy Ruppel summarizes *Jasmine* as a novel that suggests "a strategy of continual transformation as a necessary and historically contingent ethic of survival" (182). Indeed Jasmine traverses through her different lives, as separate versions of herself, desirous to relinquish the previous self when coming into the subsequent one. Intrinsic to her nomadic existence is the violence necessary to the "re-birthing" of selves at each juncture. Jasmine says, "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Mukherjee 29). Linked to this quote are several potential questions. The first of which is, will the violent, uncompassionate murders of past selves ensure a complete finality to those previous selves, leaving no occasion for resurfacing? Jasmine admits to being haunted by her past, despite her drastic measures to quell

such an occurrence, when she says, “ghosts float toward me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti” (Mukherjee 21). When fragments of her previous selves come back to haunt her, surely her current state of being will lose opacity, as she cannot murder memory. It is memory that allows past identities or past lives to creep into the present or the future. Moreover as she, assuming there is an essence of the original Jasmine, shuttles between identities and resides in “new” vessels, it is still the same physical form that she inhabits. It is in renaming herself and adopting a different life that Jasmine attempts to redefine her circumstances and ultimately gain autonomy.

In the most blatant adoption of myth in the novel, Jasmine takes on the image of the goddess Kali and enacts violence upon Half-Face by killing him after he unceremoniously raped her. In fact, both myths come into play here because the Half-Face figure speaks of Jasmine as the myth of the exotic Asian woman, ready to be plundered, there for the taking. By that logic, it is Jasmine’s ethnicity that landed her in that objectified position and it is also her Asianness that allows her to transcend it, albeit in the form of the Hindu goddess figure that she reimages herself as. The scene in which she takes on the persona of the destructive goddess Kali is depicted as rather ritualistic as she purifies herself and contemplates suicide. Instead she is filled with a “sense of mission” (Mukherjee 117) and stabs Half-Face to death, with blood pouring from her tongue to cement the “Kali” association. Earlier in the novel, Jasmine says in relation to Bud, “I feel so potent, a goddess” (Mukherjee 12), and here there is a displacement of agency, as it is only in the form of the goddess Kali, a mythic cosmic power, that Jasmine is able to exact revenge and transcend her state of being a victim.

As such, a critique of gender politics is indirectly enacted here and highlights the passivity that women are resigned to. Beauvoir purports that “woman seems to be the inessential who never goes back to being the essential” (Beauvoir 301). Is the

oppression of being woman so debilitating that only in the appropriation of myth, or perhaps a similar strategy, can a woman rise against her circumstances? For Jasmine, this is in fact the case. And of course we are not only speaking of woman as “the second sex” here, but also a woman doubly marginalized due to her being a Third World subject. What this doubly marginalized position entails is an even more intense oppression that Jasmine is battling with. In her article on “The Violence of Identity”, Kristin Carter-Sanborn asserts that the ability to shuttle between identities is a symptom of the liminality of the “Third World subject” (575). I want to say that not only does Jasmine’s liminality enhance her chameleon-like attributes, but that she also has within her a whole different bag of tricks to contend with whatever comes her way. Roberts appropriates the lines of the poet Meredith Stricker to help illustrate this when she says, “the more a thing is torn/the more places it can connect” (qtd.in Roberts 93). Jasmine, with all her broken-ness, does possess a greater ease and well of resources with which to find ways of mending herself. In this case, she taps into the myths of her culture and projects the strong and powerful goddess Kali, adorning her identity like a mask that enables her to act out the violence that Half-Face deserved. In this sense, Jasmine’s appropriation of myth, while liberating to some extent, also serves mainly to validate her actions. By embodying a goddess, she is purging herself of carnal sin, and thereby extracting herself from ordinary modes of social behaviour. This particular myth that she adopts does in fact promise great things for the Third World subject, as opposed to the essentially patriarchal myth of Fa Mulan, for the Kali myth grants power, beauty and with it an autonomy that is not partial to patriarchy. Interestingly, like Jasmine, the goddess Kali is also an epitome of ambivalence since she is “both life-giver and destroyer” (Gross 281). The nature of the destruction that Kali promotes, however, is that the destruction that she induces is



merely to “make way for renewal”, and the birth of something better than what once existed (Gross 283).

Circling back to the initial quote about the “re-birthing of selves in the images of dreams,” (Mukherjee 29) let me draw attention to the fact that Jasmine says “images of dreams” and not “images of *our* dreams”. For all her desire to reclaim autonomy, it seems here, in the lack of a possessive noun, as if she is merely tapping into a very vague ideal, one that might have been borrowed from the echoes of some larger community outside of her own self-articulated desires. Sanborn invokes Fanon’s colonialist fantasy in her article and in deconstructing the colonized “black”, Fanon states that “the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness” (qtd in Sanborn 582). While Jasmine does not completely renounce her ethnic culture, she does adopt the dreams of the mainstream “mother country”, resulting in a perpetual ambivalence within her formation of identity. These self/community, private/public, internal/external, colonizer/colonized binaries recirculate as motifs throughout the novel, and again, as in *Woman Warrior*, we continue to assess the appropriation of myth in relation to this motif.

Jasmine appears to bask in her inscrutability to those around her, at times even pandering to an inert self-exoticisation. She escapes her past lives in order to escape any fixed history of self that could pin her down to an essential being. But the idea of being known and fixed to a specific identity involves the notion of the public; she is escaping who she has been in relation to people whose lives she has been a part of, the husbands she has had. Does her need to keep moving indicate a desire to uproot herself from a community that would know her and impose its own set code of conduct or cultural expectations upon her? In choosing to flee from feudalistic India,

that has shown itself to be oppressive and regressive, it seems plausible to see it that way. As for her flight from New York, it was due to the reappearance of the murderous political radical Sukhwinder Singh, a reminder of her life in India as well as Prakash's death.

In a way, her rejection of the astrologer's prophecy and her subsequent resistance to the idea of a pre-ordained destiny is a rejection of myth. It is also an example of how myth can serve to stifle an individual. The ways in which Jasmine propounds on the idea of reincarnation is, on the other hand, an adaptation of traditional Hindu myths that underlie their religious beliefs. Her entire philosophy of the re-birthing of selves is based upon reincarnation, and Jill Roberts points out that Jasmine's identity shifts "mimic the traditional Hindu cycle of rebirths, her four "marriages" symbolizing the four "yugas" or stages of the universe" (89) as shown when Jasmine says, "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half-Face for Kali" (Mukherjee 197). This appropriation of myth and traditional belief could be read as self-justification for an uncontrollable penchant for the fragmentation of the self. But for Jasmine, it equips her with the strength that she needs to survive and to negotiate the hostile climate that surrounds a Third World refugee in First World America.

In the novel, Jasmine recounts the tragedy of Vimla, who "doused herself with kerosene and flung herself on a stove," (Mukherjee 15) a year after her husband died of typhoid. Vimla's suicide is reminiscent of the Hindu practice of "sati" which is understood as "widow immolation" (Carter-Sanborn 581) and foreshadows Jasmine's eventual situation when she herself is widowed and begins to harbour the intent of burning herself with Prakash's garments in America in a symbolic gesture. But Jasmine has a different take on Vimla's actions. She says, "The villagers say when a

clay pitcher breaks, you see that the air inside is the same as outside. Vimla set herself on fire because she had broken her pitcher; she saw there were no insides and outsides. We are shells of the same Absolute” (Mukherjee 15). If there is no demarcation between commonly opposing absolutes like “inside” and “outside”, perhaps what Vimla felt was that there was no dividing line between other absolutes like life and death, or at least none worth enforcing or being enforced by. Even though Jasmine says that she is a shell of the same Absolute, yet she fights against a passive existence and challenges her destiny. This contrast in self-philosophy between Vimla and Jasmine is important to pinpoint in attempting to situate Jasmine’s ruminations of how her self-concept fits into her quest for an individual identity.

There are many instances where Jasmine breaks out of the cultural ties that bind her to a pre-existing mode of behaviour. But as Jane, she clings to her ethnicity and plays the role of a traditional wife to Bud, almost noble in her diligence and compassionate care-giving. She performs her Indian-ness and engages in self-exoticisation even as she says, “Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am” (Mukherjee 200). For the time that she is in Baden, she is content with constructing a myth out of her own identity or at least the identity she portrays for those around her. Nevertheless, adjacent to the vitality and wisdom that the East channels through her is still the “other-ness” that threatens. Jasmine says, “My genuine foreignness frightens [Bud]...It frightens me, too” (Mukherjee 26). Perhaps it is the unchannelled well of cultural potency deep within her that scares even her. By this I mean her potential for violence when the need arises, as with the incident with Half-Face, which was a violence facilitated by mythic channelling. For Bud, one would imagine that the threat lies in the unknown, of

Jasmine's foreignness, but also of the missing history that he has not been privy to. Although Jasmine always renegotiates her new identities and builds her new selves only in relation to other individuals, she also does so by withholding the entirety of who she has been before and the entirety of her experiences. She enforces the inside/outside dialectic by burying her private lives and attempts to suppress the resurfacing of her former selves.

From another perspective, it could be argued that Jasmine is perpetually in motion, "shuttling between identities" (Mukherjee 77) simply because she is mimicking the characteristics of America and by extension embodying the myth of America, almost as if she is addicted to the thrill of the journey she is on. She says:

It is by now a passing wave of nausea, this response to the speed of transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American landscape. I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. (Mukherjee 138-9)

She is critical yet embraces all that her idea of America promises; it hurtles forwards even as she once described India as "backward"; America symbolizes the potential for fluidity and transience while in India, everything is fixed, to some extent, as part of "the same Absolute" (Mukherjee 15). Taylor is, for her, the embodiment of the American life she desired. Even though Bud is American too, he has been rendered half the man that he used to be due to the darker side of America and the backlash of capitalism. Jasmine relishes her adventures with Taylor and revels in the fact that she has "bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase" (Mukherjee 186). When Jasmine speaks of Bud in his bathrobe, she feels that being his intended wife has wielded her a kind of power in her social elevation. She says, "I

have triumphed” because growing up in Hasnapur, the kind of men who wore bathrobes were those in films. In her jump from Bud to Taylor, she seems to be ascending the social and cultural ladder. In Jasmine’s psyche, she is undoubtedly still a slave to the concept of the rigid caste system that she was oppressed by. Here, Jasmine conflates love with liberation and an innate desire for fulfilment, perhaps a fulfilment based on her own self-constructed myths of identity. Jasmine falls in love with Taylor’s “world, his ease, its careful confidence and graceful self-absorption” and she wanted to become the person that Taylor and Wylie saw her as: “humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate” (Mukherjee 171). Taylor was for Jasmine a mirror reflecting a self that she could morph into and be proud of, another myth to perpetuate and build as her reality.

As R. Radhakrishnan writes, “the task for radical ethnicity is to thematize and subsequently problematize its entrapment within these binary elaborations with the intent of stepping beyond to find its own adequate language” (216). For Jasmine, this search for an “adequate language” takes the form of her perpetual adaptation, of her tale of survival, and the multiple lives that she has lived. There is and never will be an “adequate language”, but striving for a semblance of something adequate brings her closer to such a project. Negotiating between identities and selves has been her coping mechanism amidst the brutalities of her world, and her eventual literal sprint towards a future with Taylor symbolizes the slant of her priorities. As much as Taylor is, for Jasmine, the piece of America that she wants, he is also a character that does not shy away from her ethnicity. Jasmine says that her foreignness did not scare Taylor, not the way it genuinely frightened Bud. Jasmine remains chained to her ethnicity and knows she cannot escape her cultural inheritances. There is no clear-cut formula for hybridisation, and she continues to bask in her ambivalence of being the embodiment

of so many conflicting elements all at once. And yet, ultimately this long-drawn out quest for autonomy remains enervated, since at the end Jasmine says “there is nothing I can do”, relinquishing her authority and agency again to the cosmos: “Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud” (Mukherjee 241). Myth as a resource for empowerment, in the case of Jasmine, is therefore a double-edged sword and its positive effects are only temporal, until the next hurdle comes along in the life of this tenacious being. Her old-world myths, which resonate of the ancient social order that demands submission and ignorance, impede her search for happiness. Yet it is the Goddess myth that lends her the surge of power that she needs to commit metaphorical *sati* as Jasmine, and to rebirth herself as the next new self after that violent encounter. It is the new myths however, which Jasmine subconsciously constructs in her mind, that extracts her from her Third World sensibilities and positions her within a first-world framework. This alignment with the First World could be said to be a rise of power, one that allows her to govern herself at least and to break out of the social order she once knew. She is, however, too accustomed to the inherent temporality of her landscapes, and knows that even “in America, nothing lasts” (Mukherjee 181).

#### EXORCISING THE GHOST OF BELOVED

Earlier in this paper, in reference to *The Woman Warrior*, I highlighted the feminist tradition of passing on the heritage of story, talk-story, and myths, and went on to suggest that the maternal relationship is key to the return to the body and the finding of a self. For Sethe and the other female characters in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, this continues to ring true even as they renegotiate their violent histories in

conjunction with maternal relationships, either as mother or daughter, and sometimes, as both. The supernatural circumstances encircling Beloved's return are an embodiment of myth in this text, but beyond that, this is a text that intricately interweaves narrative and history as mythic. Rimmon-Kenan, in her book on *Narration, Representation and Subjectivity*, extrapolates on how *Beloved* "explores the access potential of narration in recovering the repressed path, retrieving memory and fighting the suppression of the individual and communal voice" (104). Again, in *Beloved*, as with the other texts, it is evident how the appropriations of myth by the central character are always done in conjunction with another person, and how it is a collective act, which mimics a fusing of selves before the main individual is able to eventually diffuse from that compounded identity into a whole stand-alone self.

Barbara Christian states:

People of colour have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic...Our theorizing is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs. (Qtd in Homans 73)

While each of the texts examined in this paper brings with it its own set of ethnic and cultural particularities, I find the historical circumstances of the community within *Beloved* the most violent, leaving deeper scars in their collective psyche, because of their enslavement.

Morrison's novel is said to have succeeded in realistically portraying "the great social trends and historical forces as offering a prehistory to the present" (Rody 93) and has served to "transform black history into mythic fiction" (Rody 93). Yet, even as Morrison situates her novel against the backdrop of the violent and oppressive history of those who were enslaved, she calls on writers to "de-emphasize the institution of slavery and to put the authority back into the hands of the slave" (qtd in

Rody 94). Arlene Keizer illustrates the setting of *Beloved*'s socio-historical backdrop quite simply when she says that in the novel, "the capitalist, racial-caste system of American slavery operates by dismembering, both figuratively and literally, the body and spirit of the slave" (Keizer 106). Hence, this capitalist system when clashed against the "subjugated West African beliefs" reveals the sites where "black identities are formed, maintained, and transformed" (Keizer 106). Morrison clearly intended to expose the brutality of the oppressive experience of such a system as represented by a few main characters, and by delving deep into their battered psyches to speak as a microcosm for the collective broken-ness of their community. Clemons purports that "writing that contacts collective memory conflates the personal and the communal, works to open the *interior life* of the individual into the *anterior life* of the people" (Qtd in Rody 97). This movement from the private to the public mimics Sethe's narrative journey, even as she eventually re-situates her existence within the context of the community and returns to it, for mere survival.

In the first place, we are meant to fathom the psychological position of Sethe, the non-subjective self who cannot begin to project herself as a whole self, and cannot come into subjecthood. Babbitt attempts to contextualize this incomplete concept of self when she sees Sethe as part of a "social system that thoroughly denies her existence as a full human being", hence her only means of acquiring understanding of her self is through appropriating what are commonly known as fully human emotions and acting based on those epistemic assumptions. Key to this concept of her appropriation of human emotions is her idea of love, and what it means to be a mother. This is a woman who mothers her children without having the right to possess them as her own, as belonging to her, and eventually commits infanticide out of a violent love that is "too thick" (Morrison 193).



For her people, “cultural transmission requires the retrieval of traumatic memories” (Rody 99) and Sethe faces her future by “beating back the past” (Morrison 73). Memory seems to be the pus that threatens to ooze out from the wounds of the past, and Rody states “*rememory* transforms memory into a property of consciousness with the heightened imaginative power sufficient to the ethnic historical novel’s claim to represent the past” (Rody 102). Suffice to say that that which is most ardently repressed and that which is most “unspeakable” must be allowed to be revisited in order for the characters involved to conquer the ghosts of their pasts, as occurs quite literally in *Beloved*. This process of drawing out painful personal histories is expedited by the arrival of Paul D at 124, the haunted house where Sethe lives. The development from silence to voice ignites the rehabilitation that Sethe undergoes in order to form her own identity as a self. The co-relation between articulation and identity has also been dealt with in Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* when the protagonist says to the silent Chinese girl, “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality” (Kingston 180). And for Sethe, what is integral in her situation is not just merely talking but forcing herself to “rememory” and confront her guilt as a means of catharsis. This catharsis, however, is not complete simply with the acts of story telling that Sethe engages in, but can only be brought to resolution with the arrival of Beloved in her life.

What Rody cites as the mythological core of the novel is the story behind Denver’s birth, amidst seemingly insurmountable odds, as Sethe is fleeing from slavery. Sethe exhibits a supernatural strength in surviving the wounds, fatigue, and eventual childbirth in appalling conditions. The theme of the maternal symbolic figures here, as Sethe, in her heroic quest to keep her children safe and to get “her milk to her baby girl,” (Morrison 19) only survived propelled by her role as mother, in

being the vessel to dispense milk to her babies. She remembers thinking in her arduous escape, “this baby’s ma’am is gonna die in wild onions on the bloody side of Ohio River” (qtd in Wyatt 476). This manner of reference, in which there is a displacement of subjectivity, depicts the pattern of Sethe being a non-entity outside of being a mother. This complexity leads on to the next central narrative point within the novel, namely, the act of infanticide in which Sethe murders her “crawling-already(?)” (Morrison 110) baby girl.

This particular episode has been critiqued in so many ways, with differing degrees of judgement and blame set upon Sethe, and the best excerpt that encapsulates the impossibility of the situation is the following:

No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they could be safe. (Morrison 192)

What I want to suggest of this richly loaded episode is that even as chiasmus recurs as a motif within the narrative structure of the text, so are social structures and concepts of morality and humanity overturned and reconfigured based on the particularities of the socio-historical background of the characters of *Beloved*. If humanity as it existed in the realm of Bluestone allowed for the brutalities that the slaves, and “used-to-be-slaves” were subjected to, perhaps Sethe didn’t see a need to conform to the corresponding delineations, which that system of humanity entails. The margins between life and death, guilty or innocent became blurred and the exigency of keeping her children out of the destruction of slavery provoked her to the contradiction of murdering her own child.

In a book on the topic of ethical feminism, Drucilla Cornell discusses how the appropriation of the myth of Medea in Sethe's act of infanticide problematizes the original myth and she states: "the retelling of the myth as a story in which there is no autonomous life to be denied to the children in the first place, because of slavery, dramatizes the very difference of the Afro-American mother's situation" (188). The Medea myth is "a story about a mother killing her children to protect them from the father and the loss of their autonomy," (qtd in Babbitt 3) while Sethe's plight is different because her children have no autonomy at stake to begin with. Babbitt questions if we should think of it as a case of the myth being problematized by reality. In this text, the appropriation of the myth of Medea, even if done consciously, is only done on the level of the author without making it a clear invocation by the protagonist. This differs from the previous two texts, where the female protagonists themselves reflexively employ the myths to help them renegotiate their identities. While it is interesting to trace Sethe's actions in the Medea myth, perhaps the larger myth at play here is the myth that haunts the dreams of these "used-to-be-slaves", the myth of being human. By this I mean the hidden dream of being capable of being counted as a citizen of their nation, of having basic human rights, of freedom. Morrison defines freedom in the text, as getting to a "place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire" (Morrison 191). With regards to their newfound freedom due to the Emancipation, Sethe says, "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 112). Freedom, therefore, is intrinsically linked to the right to love. Paul D condemns Sethe's claim to love as though she were truly free, since he believes that as "used-to-be-slaves", "the best thing was to love just a little bit" (Morrison 54).

Now that the discourse of love as an ideology of freedom has been opened up, we can finally hone in on the embodiment of Beloved as a mythic symbol that is a potent stand-in for millions of nameless faces who have perished because of the history of slavery. Morrison links Beloved to the “Sixty Million and more” in the epigraph of the novel by “joining her spirit to the body of a woman who died on one of the slave ships” (Morrison 250). Beloved functions in the text as a mythic, mysterious disembodied spirit that, ironically, embodies the loss of so many, and distinctively takes on the history of Sethe’s murdered two-year old. Beloved’s rebirth therefore serves not only as the catalyst for Sethe’s coming into herself but also for the text to resonate as a memorial for the millions of others whose stories are not told. Morrison shows us how Beloved is slowly but eventually recognised as the baby ghost returned in the body of a young woman, who is privy to personal family details that only she would know. Beloved, like Denver, thrives on narratives that include her own personal history, and Rimmon-Kenan purports that “the use of narrative levels both subverts a certain relationship between narrating voice and person, and very subtly suggests that narration may become a basis for a birth into self” (105). What Rimmon-Kenan suggests here is that not only does the narrator control the narration of the stories she tells, but also that it the narration can control the circumstances of the narrator’s sense of selfhood. Beloved begs Denver for stories of the past as though somewhere within those stories, the story of her own life and death would come out and that would somehow feed her existence. And for Denver, in retelling, she gave “blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat [...] as the monologue became a duet” (Morrison 92). Rimmon-Kenan asserts that this manner of narration becomes “a way of claiming ownership of the self” (112) and I would also say that in a similar vein to how Sethe always defined herself in relation to

her children, so does this tale of genesis amidst extraordinary circumstances root Denver in relation to her mother.

The analepsis that characterizes the narrative structure of *Beloved* mimics the arbitrary nature in which memory revisits the characters, and also serves as a technique to keep the reader in suspense in trying to piece together the fragments of history, which eventually reveals itself in all its brutality. But beyond that, the fact that the point of view constantly shifts also suggests that such a history can only be endured with the collective participation of the members of society who have lived through it. Moreover, the fusing of narratives that occurs within the locked house of 124 dramatizes the conflation of identities and the sense of how Sethe always viewed herself as coterminous with her children. This “fugue” of confessions is a key part of the novel because when the turn occurs, and Sethe slowly finds herself claiming her own individual identity, the contrast is more apparent. *Beloved* returns to fill up the emotional hunger which Sethe and Denver exhibit, almost as much as to fulfil her own nominal desire to be loved. This much is apparent from the pastiche of “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” that rose up as a “roaring” (Morrison 235, 213). Underlying all three veins of confession is the idea of possession, and of love, as Sethe says, “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine,” and she ends that chapter with her newfound access to peace, as she reiterates, “She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine” (Morrison 236, 241). Denver echoes this sentiment in her own way when she says, “Beloved is my sister” and ends her chapter with “I do. Love her. I do. [...] She’s mine, Beloved. She’s mine” (Morrison 247). There is, however, a semantic ambiguity here in this last excerpt. Is Denver echoing Sethe’s claim to Beloved, by saying that Beloved belongs to her too, as her sister? Or is she telling Beloved that she (Sethe) belongs to her, as a sort of warning not to hog her completely? Either

interpretation would make sense and this ambiguity opens up the possibility of both renderings. For Beloved, her oration is distinctively more desperate, not only because some fragments intimate that she has taken on the persona of someone who had lived through the misery of dying on a slave ship, but also because she loves with an intensity that threatens to obliterate her “beloved”. She says:

I am Beloved and she is mine [...] I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is looking and to be looking at it too [...] Now we can join a hot thing (Morrison 247, 252).

Rody frames this fusion of confessions as a “jouissant communion that seems to be a momentary utopian resolution of the war between present and past” (Rody 111) and this is precisely what Beloved seems to achieve: a resolution of the past within Sethe’s conscience. This spirit that is Beloved is not a true entity and only boasts of whispers of a self, or a history and cannot actually hold memory, though she seems to. Her nebulous nature makes it possible to dredge up the past, or to take on certain forms that draw out certain responses, without ever having to make sense. The recognition that Sethe arrives at when she identifies Beloved as her murdered baby girl opens up a new realm of possibility for Sethe, as she begins to realize that now that she is forgiven there is no need to “rememory” (Morrison 226). In this particular instance, Sethe alludes to the “rememory” of guilt in her act of infanticide. Yet Beloved is, to some extent, a product of rememory, a mythic embodiment of the collective “rememory” of the community (Morrison 226). This seeming contradiction is of course brought about by the ambivalent nature of what Beloved really is. Consequently, Beloved’s greed for love begins to consume Sethe, and an inversion of authority takes place as Sethe shrinks into the child and Denver is forced to take

action. In the span of time before Beloved returned to Sethe, it was as though she had lost herself when she took the life of her child, living in self-reprobation. Beloved therefore, functions as a “surrogate self” (Rody 105). Since Beloved is the embodiment of myth in this novel, recall how in their appropriations of myth, the female characters in the other texts explored also render their myth-enabled selves as surrogate selves. They, too, attain a form of agency not natural to their existing selves, but readily available to them when putting on the mask of their surrogate selves, empowered by myth.

When Denver breaks the confinement that her family had inflicted upon themselves, and steps out towards the community to ask for help, she dramatizes the notion that in striving for a renewal of identity that is sustainable, one needs to merge with the community and build not just an individual identity, but also one that finds itself comfortable as a unit within a collective identity as well. Dana Heller echoes this idea when she asserts, “the family cannot survive in isolation but requires the strength and protection of a much wider network of kinfolk” (Heller 115). Interestingly, it is also through this outstretching towards her community that Denver solidifies her own concept of self. When Denver speaks of her plight to Mrs Jones, Mrs Jones says, “Oh baby” and Denver “did not know it then, but it was the word ‘baby’ said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman” (Morrison 292). Rody expands the significance of this utterance when she says that:

The circulation of female identity through the positions “baby,” “daughter,” “woman,” “mother,” and “grandmother” links Morrison’s female characters in an imaginative fusion that reflects the mother-daughter psychic dialectic of this “history,” a time-transcending

structure in which the novel of history meets the poetics of motherlove” (Rody 107-108).

The word “baby” is used to attach endearment to the individual that the term refers too, thus inviting a new kind of dependency and softening of the heart in allowing the sort of vulnerability that intimacy entails. Baby Suggs was the precedent for this in Denver’s family, who took on the name after being bestowed the term of affection by her husband, almost as if allowing a new kind of tenderness in their hard lives. After the collective exorcism performed by women of the community, Beloved eventually vanishes and Sethe is left in despair again. Paul D re-enters the domain of 124, and entices Sethe into building “some kind of tomorrow” together (Morrison 322). Crucial to this ending is at the point when Sethe laments Beloved’s departure, and she says, “She was my best thing” (Morrison 321) and Paul D gently, but with conviction, tells her that “you your best thing, Sethe. You are” (Morrison 322). When Sethe replies with “Me?Me?” (Morrison 322) it is as if finally she is beginning to claim ownership of her “free self” and to come into an identity of her own, fully as an unfettered human being.

As for Beloved, the epilogue reiterates how her story was “not a story to pass on” (Morrison 323), yet her absence is rendered so vividly and the whole novel ends with her name, so that one imagines that it is indeed “a story to pass on” even as “unspeakable thoughts must find their voice”, for the community to rebuild their lives. Ultimately, the myths that encircle the text of *Beloved*, while not necessarily blatantly empowering, at least serve as a catalyst for renewal. The myth that is Beloved will somehow be passed on to serve as reminder of the atrocities of humanity that one can be driven to, in the face of slavery and other such violations of humanity.



## THEY ARE ALL STORIES TO PASS ON

As a sort of conclusion I wish to return to our understanding of what myth is and what myth can do:

Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context – they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they're not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but – and this is fortunate – never set so hard they cannot be changed again.

(Warner 14)

All three texts examined have demonstrated this mutable essence and power of myth and have shown its malleability. Myths exist in parts or as wholes and almost never remain the same after they have been digested and regurgitated by the societies that live by them and through them.

In Kingston's *Woman Warrior* I have depicted how Maxine fashioned a new myth out of the ones she had been fed throughout her childhood and beyond. And in fact, when we think about the text as a living text in itself, through its metatextuality, the novel serves as the embodiment of the perpetuation of the myths that Kingston had employed for fodder, as well as the reinscribed myths that she leaves her readers with. Rabine discusses the potentiality within myths that find themselves in the written form when she purports: "a story that is oppressive when orally transmitted within the context of family and community is liberating when transformed into writing" (482). Moreover, Rabine asserts that "writing is static", thereby implying an absoluteness of meaning that differs from the fluidity of the "oral stories [which] change from telling to telling" (488). While I do see a sense of truth in this surmise, I

would also beg to differ, seeing as eventhough the writing might be static, the possibility of its interpretation, especially with such a culturally loaded text, is multiple. Myths and literatures that engage with myths are therefore always potentially contradictory, simply due to the ambivalent and ever-mutating nature of myth. This is the beauty of myth.

As Eric Gould aptly renders the concept of myth, he writes of myth as “a synthesis of value which uniquely manages to mean most things to most people. It is allegory and tautology, reason and unreason, logic and fantasy, waking thought and dream, origin and end” (qtd in Blazek & Glenday 1). While seemingly opening up an accessibility that includes almost all of literature, this inclusivity of myth can be problematic. If everything is myth, then what isn’t? Circling back to my earlier assertion that myth lies in the intersection between fiction and history, I suggest that while traces of myth might be found in a lot of literature, what we mean by myths are: communally accepted stories of heroism, reminiscent of a certain time in history, where a tribe or community triumphed over seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The myths expounded upon in all three texts fit into this categorization and the newly inscribed myths that transpired from the original myths have opened up a more justifiable mode for gleaning from the older myths. Perhaps there is a need for mythmakers to begin to impose a certain criterion on what might constitute as myths that are to be perpetuated, and championed. But doing so would be almost like delineating a fixed set of curated narrations available to society; much in the way Plato’s ideal republic was conceived. While many myths did set out to impose a certain hegemonic order, in the contemporary treatments of myth that have opened up other discourses, the impositions have lost their dictatorial grasp.

When we examine the ways in which these highly inexhaustible entities have been subsumed into contemporary ethnic American literature, not only are the authors in question given a new vantage point with which to “articulate the complexity of the embodied experience” of hybridity (Heywood 84), but simultaneously the American canon is growing to include the voices of these ethnic Americans, and the cultural myths that they bring into the fray. The texts therefore continue to perpetuate myths and serve as new alternatives to the old myths subscribed to within the texts and as we have seen, while myths, whether old or new, provide solace or modes of empowerment, or act as obstacles for the oppressed subject negotiating a new identity, ultimately the multiplicity that the various forms of myth offer the individual can only be a platform for betterment. By this I do not mean that all myths provide only for positive modes of empowerment, but that the fact of the availability of these myths as entities to engage and negotiate with, does eventually lead to a more comprehensive awareness of self in the journey towards claiming an individual identity. Mukherjee depicts this in an almost self-reflexive manner in *Jasmine*, when Jasmine is perpetually negotiating with the contradictory myths available to her. Furthermore, even as Kingston, Mukherjee and Morrison, in themselves and as purveyors of culturally entrenched texts, represent their communities, so do the individual protagonists’ journeys eventually help with “shap[ing] the cultural order, introducing new perspectives and providing alternate mythologies for creating meaning” (Heywood 94). Hence, myths work both on the personal level as well as in a communitarian environment, without which they cannot continue to thrive. The sense of a collective experience is crucial to these protagonists, for even as their stories are explored as individuals, they are always to be understood as microcosms of their lived experiences of the communities they come from. Kingston echoes this

sodality when she speaks of her writing and that of Toni Morrison and Leslie Silko, another woman author of colour: “Toni’s and Leslie’s and my aliveness must come from our senses of a connection with other people who have a community and a tribe. We are living life in a more dangerous place” (qtd in Yuan 218). The myths that they employ in their literature only help to colour their “aliveness”. To borrow a quote from Gloria Anzaldua:

Haunted by the voices and images that violated us, bearing the pains of the past, we are slowly acquiring the tools to change the disabling images and memories, to replace them with self-affirming ones, to recreate our pasts and alter them—for the past can be as malleable as the present. (qtd in Cheung 1993: 74).

In and through myths, we can be women warriors, goddesses, exorcists and more. And by tools inferred by Anzaldua, we can include myths, which are readily available to all who seek to find themselves anew, in literature and outside of it.

(word count: 11,250)

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