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El “sueño americano” en la literatura de
emigración de escritoras asiático-americanas
(1976-2006)/

The American Dream in the Immigration
Narratives of Asian American Women Writers
(1976-2006)

Paula Naya Montero

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**Directora da Tese:
Begoña Simal González**

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A mis padres, por su idealismo, valores y fortaleza. A Pablo, por su amor, paciencia y ánimo durante este casi interminable proceso. A mi hijo Felipe, mi alegría y mi mejor “regalo”. A un lugar, Nueva York, que tanto me ha dado.

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Abstracts

The American Dream in the Immigration Narratives of Asian American Women Writers (1976-2006)

This dissertation focuses on the “American Dream” as a *topos* in immigration literature, specifically in the narratives of four (South) Asian women writers, Maxine Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee, Gish Jen and Jhumpa Lahiri. My main thesis is that the immigrant characters in these novels and short stories aim to construct what I have called “micro-societies.” For this reason, I examine the factors that push these immigrant characters, both “Adams” and “Eves,” to live apart from the mainstream America, in these “micro-societies,” where physical borders get blurred and there is room for the immigrant to reproduce his/her “imaginary homelands” within the limits of his/her “imaginary America.” Complementarily, this dissertation explores the ways in which the “American Dream” has been fictionalized by these ethnic writers, in an attempt to ascertain to what extent the “ethnic” version of the “American Dream” differs from the traditional approaches to the concept. Finally, I also map out the “ecocritical traces” present in these texts, in other words, I explore how the “natural” component is depicted in these immigrant narratives of the Dream, using recent environmental criticism as a theoretical framework.

El “sueño americano” en la literatura de emigración de escritoras asiático-americanas (1976-2006)

Esta tesis doctoral explora el topos del “sueño americano” en la llamada literatura de emigración, en concreto, en la obra de varias escritoras americanas de origen (sud)asiático: Maxine Hong Kingston, Gish Jen, Bharati Mukherjee y Jhumpa Lahiri. Parto de la hipótesis de que, en los personajes inmigrantes que habitan los textos elegidos (relatos y novelas), podemos observar una tendencia a construir nuevos espacios dentro de la sociedad americana, que he denominado “micro-sociedades,” como respuesta a la búsqueda del “sueño americano”. Me detengo por ello en los factores que contribuyen a que dichos emigrantes, tanto “Eves” como “Adams”, decidan vivir alejados de la llamada “mainstream America”, en espacios donde los bordes físicos desaparecen y donde el emigrante puede reproducir sus “imaginary homelands” en el contexto de su “imaginary America.” Por otro lado, esta tesis estudia el modo en que el “sueño americano” ha sido “ficcionalizado” por estas autoras, con la intención de discernir de qué manera la versión “étnica” del sueño se distingue de la versión tradicional de este concepto. Finalmente, apoyándome en las corrientes críticas más recientes, realizo una lectura de tres de estos textos desde el prisma de la ecocrítica, con el fin de demostrar la relevancia del componente natural en el discurso del “sueño americano”.

O “sono americano” na literatura de emigración de escritoras asiático-americanas (1976-2006)

Esta tese doutoral explora o topos do "sono americano" na chamada literatura de emigración, en concreto, na obra de varias escritoras americanas de orixe (sud)asiático: Maxine Hong Kingston, Gish Jen, Bharati Mukherjee e Jhumpa Lahiri. Parto da hipótese de que, nos personaxes inmigrantes que habitan os textos elixidos (relatos e novelas), podemos observar unha tendencia a construír novos espazos dentro da sociedade americana, que denominei "micro-sociedades," como resposta á busca do "sono americano." Detéñome por iso nos factores que contribúen a que os devanditos emigrantes, tanto "Eves" coma "Adams," decidan vivir afastados da chamada "mainstream America," en espazos onde os bordos físicos desaparecen e onde o emigrante pode reproducir as súas "imaginary homelands," no contexto da súa "imaginary America." Por outro lado, esta tese estuda o modo no que o "soño americano" foi "ficcionalizado" por estas autoras, coa intención de discernir de que xeito a versión "étnica" do sono distínguese da versión tradicional deste concepto. Finalmente, apoiándome nas correntes críticas máis recentes, realizo unha lectura de tres destes textos dende o prisma da ecocrítica, co fin de demostrar a relevancia do compoñente natural no discurso de "sono americano."

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1. Introduction

. . . I say to you today, my friends . . . I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out of the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day, on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . .

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The American Dream, myth or reality? The American Dream has been the inspiration in the life and existence of the American country. Initially conceived by the first people who came to America to begin a new life, it is the dream that many immigrants still aspire to attain nowadays. The period when I started to write this dissertation coincided with a historic change in the American political arena, in the figure of the first African American president of United States, Barack Obama. The myth of the American Dream has been very palpable in the American social and political atmosphere since then. Arguably, the fact that the Dream has come true for Barack Obama also proclaims its reality. If an African American can reach

the White House— unthinkable in past years—does it mean that the American Dream is really possible and attainable for all American citizens? This doctoral thesis aims to explore the works of four contemporary (South) Asian American women writers and their depictions and revisions of a traditionally “white and male” American Dream.¹

As is customary, this first chapter will provide an overview of what I aim to do in this dissertation, as well as introducing the methodology and critical theory I will use to demonstrate my thesis. Taking as my starting point the permanence of the *topos* of the “American Dream” in immigration literature, I work with the hypothesis that the immigrant characters in a representative corpus of Asian American texts have tried to construct “micro-societies” within American society as a response to their quest for the “American Dream.” These “micro-societies” constitute those liminal spaces between cultures, or “borderlands,” to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s seminal notion, where immigrants find their niche in America. In a traditional “gendered” and “racialized” American Dream. In a Dream originally envisioned and performed by American “Adams,” I will explore the journeys of certain immigrant “Eves” in America. In particular, it is my intention to scrutinize how four (South) Asian American women writers, Maxine Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee, Gish Jen and Jhumpa Lahiri, have chosen to portray their female characters within the archetypal framework of the Dream. In addition, my research will focus on the ways in which the various aspects of “American Dream” have been fictionalized, trying to ascertain what the “American Dream” represents for “ethnic” writers nowadays and to what extent this “American Dream” differs

1 I deliberately use capital letters when referring to the (American) Dream throughout this dissertation, because in my opinion, since there are many dreams and dreamers, it is important to differ ones from the other, the (American) Dream, a unique Dream and a myth that has nurtured settlers and immigrants’ minds for centuries. On the other hand, as the *topos* of the American Dream was clearly masculinist in its original form, the use of masculine pronouns and nouns for generalizations, still a common practice in many literary studies, is even more frequent in older texts dealing with the American myth. Since this dissertation explores the role of “Eves” in the American Dream, such “sexist” language is doubly inappropriate; therefore, I shall replace those terms with more neutral ones except in direct quotation.

from previous approaches to the concept.² Furthermore, I will try to discern if there is any distinction between ethnic and non-ethnic approaches to the literature of the Dream, or if, on the contrary, we should move beyond essential binary oppositions by subverting lines and boundaries in an attempt to articulate a new “transethnic” literature, where “borders” that used to separate the mainstream discourse from the minorities one, could be undermined. Finally, I will also map out the “ecocritical traces” present in these texts, as I maintain that “nature” is inherent in the American Dream from its foundations. Hence, I will explore how the “natural” component is depicted in these immigrant narratives of the Dream using recent environmental criticism as a theoretical framework.

As anticipated above, the four Asian American writers I have chosen for this dissertation are Kingston, Mukherjee, Jen and Lahiri. The choice is determined by my intention to gather (South) Asian American women writers whose celebrated works have broken some kind of “boundaries” in their portrayal of the American Dream. Thus, Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975) has been the object of particular criticism from Chinese American nationalists who condemn this novel as perpetuating negative stereotypes about Chinese people and cultural traditions. Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) has also been criticized for embracing a decrepit imperialist Dream and thus betraying the reality that ethnic immigrants have historically suffered in America. Jen’s *Typical American* (1991) has been more favored in the criticism it has received, because of the use of a humorous and

2 By distinguishing between “ethnic” and “non-ethnic” writers, it is not my intention to encourage some Orientalizing approach to “ethnic” writers. Indeed, I agree with Simal’s thesis in “The Challenge of Going Transethnic,” where she argues about the problem the term “ethnic” arises, in spite of the fact that it continues to be used. Simal proposes a “transethnic” approach where “ethnic” boundaries are problematized (33). Nevertheless, when I use the term “ethnic” in this dissertation I am trying to differentiate the group of immigrant writers—first and second-generation and even expatriate—who write about immigrant characters in America from non-immigrant writers, who do not write immigrant stories, in order to see if there are any differences between them concerning the America Dream, as some authors such as Kathryn Hume suggest. Ultimately, as I intend to prove, there are still differences in the “ethnic” immigrant experience upon coming to the new country, however, I venture to affirm that there are no significant differences between immigrants and non-immigrants, ethnic and non-ethnic as regards the idea of the Dream: hence, the American Dream blurs the existing static boundaries between “ethnic” and “non-ethnic” writers, as both aim to explore and depict in their narratives a Dream which was conceived and hoped for as an equal one.

comic tone to portray the reality of a biased American Dream. I will also study the short story “In the American Society,” a prequel of *Typical American*, where Jen maintains the same wry approach in depicting the tragedy of a family living “outside” the mainstream of American society. Finally, I have chosen to include Lahiri’s fiction in my analysis: “The Third and Final Continent” and “Mrs. Sen’s,” both included in her acclaimed *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), her novel *The Namesake* (2003), and “Hell-Heaven,” a short story which appears in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). The four representative Asian American authors I have chosen – Mukherjee, Jen, Lahiri and Kingston— have all subverted many boundaries in their works when portraying the Dream. As I will discuss later, these writers move beyond physical lines and binary oppositions in order to depict and nurture a Dream that cannot be constrained, as it is not a fixed entity but still in progress and creation. The characters portrayed in the works analyzed in this dissertation also share a common but particular experience of “dreaming,” dreaming of their future, their hopes and a new life in America. However, at the end of each narrative, there remains an unshakable aftertaste of failure in their attempt to fit in with mainstream American society. Despite their initial optimism, the characters end up with an indelible feeling of displacement within the host society where they are living. Many of these characters are literally alone or feel alone in America. However, they still dream about their ideal preconception of America. And yet, the eventual disappointment leads them to the loss of innocence and the loss of belief in the American Dream, a frustration caused by different factors and voiced in different ways.

In the following chapters I will try to ascertain the real presence of the American Dream in these texts, how the American Dream works for these “Asian Eves” and also for their male counterparts, where appropriate. Women’s presence in the construction of America and in the American identity has been almost non-existent. For this reason, it is my intention

to contribute to the larger project of filling that gap by focusing on some forgotten characters, the (South) Asian American Eves. The first references to “Eve” in the context of the American Dream can be traced back to the work of Ernest Earnest in his early *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction, 1775-1914*, published in 1974. There Earnest scrutinizes how women have been portrayed in American fiction during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, questioning how the particular context of the new world shaped American women of that time. Another reference to “Eve” appears in the article “The American Eve: Miscegenation and a Feminist Frontier Fiction,” where Leland S. Person analyses Joel Porte’s study about James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pathfinder*. In *The Romance in America*, Porte maintains that Eves are forbidden to take part in Adam’s Eden as the as the condition for preserving such an Eden and paradisiacal place (28). On the other hand, Annette Kolodney in *The Land Before Her*, asserts the importance of those first women pioneers who also aimed to transform America and the wild west (xii), Eves who disappear and are forgotten in a masculine construction of the American Dream. However, references to (South) Asian American Eves are missing in Asian American literature along with other “non-canonical” American literatures. It is my intention to study the role of these Asian American Eves in the context of some immigrant contemporary interpretations of the Dream. Among other aspects, there will be a chapter devoted to madness and silence, both elements traditionally linked to women, and another exploring whether the dreams of these characters are individual in nature, or whether they are sustained by the whole community.

As befits the “oneiric” topic of this doctoral thesis, I will be using Salman Rushdie’s notion of “Imaginary Homelands.” All the narratives included in the corpus of study evince a hidden or open history of displacement, migration or exile that makes “homelands” and memories a crucial element when trying to understand the immigrant characters’ lives in

America. Thus, inspired by Rushdie's concept of "Imaginary Homelands," I will explore the ways in which the characters also dream about an "imaginary America" within the "borderlands" or "micro-societies" they inhabit. Both concepts, "imaginary homelands" and "imaginary America," can be read as the same idea with different "landscapes," since Rushdie's term evokes his "homeland," India, and in the phrase "imaginary America" I refer to the immigrants' image of America which they conjure up in their minds before arriving in the country. Nevertheless, both ideas suggest the same "act," that of "dreaming."

In this "imaginary America," there are, I also argue, a group of recurrent images scattered throughout the narratives which project the quintessential idea of what is seen as "typically American": cars, barbecues, houses and backyards. Food also has a place in this dissertation, as it not only evokes "home" and creates a kind of connection between transnational communities, but it also serves as a distinctive element in these stories, by making its consumers distinct in the eyes of mainstream society. As Gaston Bachelard claims, the "house protects the dreamer" (6), and another crucial component present in these stories is that of houses and domestic spaces. I will analyze how these "spaces" and "places" personify and shape the dreams these immigrant characters long for. Lastly, there is also a place for Meena Alexander's thesis on "the shock of arrival" immigrant characters undergo when they come to America, and also, I will venture to argue, how the immigrants react to the "fluidity" of the country. As Alexander claims, immigrants' subjectivities are constructed in an unceasing process of self-transformation that triggers off the multiple self/selves contained in these narratives of exile or diaspora; in the same way, I argue that there are manifold homelands and Americas.

As anticipated above, I will also be using, among other critical tools, the concept of "micro-societies," clearly indebted to Anzaldúa's notion of "Borderlands." I will examine the

likely factors that push these immigrant characters to live apart from mainstream society, most notably the “color bar” linked to their “racialized bodies.”

Last but not least, I will also engage in an ecocritical reading of some of these texts. I agree with Armbruster and Wallace when they claim that ecocriticism must turn its eyes to texts where the “natural” element is not so obviously present, as it is important for environmental criticism to address the connection between “natural landscapes” and the “human” presence there (4). My intention in this dissertation is to explore in these texts those “landscapes,” many not initially viewed as “natural,” in search of some presence of the “natural element,” either “unspoiled” or “spoiled,” as I will discuss in the last section.

In “Diasporas,” James Clifford endorses a new approach to the paradigms of diaspora and borders, which originally belonged to different perspectives, concluding that both categories “bleed into each other” (304). In the twenty-first century, when people’s migrations and transnational movements have reached a global dimension, he urges us to revise the concepts of both diaspora and borders, discussing the way in which present-day diasporas aim to reconfigure “non-aligned transnationalities” that surpass any nation-state borders, even “global technologies and markets” (328). Clifford maintains that there are no postcolonial cultures or places, as the term postcolonialism only makes sense in a utopian context (328). I argue that, even though postcolonialism refers to an imperialist period that many people contend has passed, as indicated by the prefix “post-,” there are “postcolonial” communities, mainly immigrants, both first and second generations, who still suffer the consequences, either political, social or economic, of a historical period that forced them to move and leave their homelands. Hence, these movements, diasporas or migrations should be considered as central to understanding the newly constructed transnational subjectivities. In “Moving selves: Immigration and Transnationalism in Gish Jen and Chitra Divakaruni,”

Begoña Simal proposes a transnational reading of two Asian American writers. At the same time, Simal ultimately considers other second-generation writers as embedded in this transnational approach to Asian American studies. It is my intention to study the American Dream from this transnational, diasporic perspective of “moving communities and selves,” echoing Simal’s article. It is a dream conceived as an everlasting idea and myth, which has laid the ground for the pillars of the American identity, but which has concomitantly subverted its “idealistic” nature, making its dreamers victims of their own desires and dreams.

To sum up, I will now offer a brief summary of the structure of this dissertation. This introduction constitutes the first chapter or part of the doctoral thesis. The second part, “‘The American Dream’ Origins and Destinies,” comprises four chapters. It starts with an overview of the history of Chinese and Asian Indian immigration to America (2.1). In the following chapter, “American Dream: The Origin of a Notion/Nation” (2.2), I will explore the origin and development of the term “American Dream.” Concomitantly, I will examine elements that are central to understanding the myth of the American Dream: the American Adam, the “self-made man,” innocence, individualism and the Frontier topos. I will also explore the “white” and “masculine” nature of the American Dream, along with the relation existing between “Nature” and the “American Dream” since its early conception. In chapter 2.3, “The American Dream in the Literary Canon,” I will offer an overview of the presence of this topos in the American literary tradition, from the Puritan sermons of John Winthrop to the post-9/11 novel. I will also try to ascertain whether there is a difference, as Kathryn Hume suggests, in the treatment of the American Dream in “ethnic” and “non-ethnic” narratives. Finally, I will also tackle the implications of “ethnicity”—such a slippery term—in the conception and pursuit of the Dream. Thus, I will briefly examine the most prominent

theories of ethnicity, addressing the difficult relation between ethnicity, class and race, on the one hand, and covering the different paradigms used to explain the immigrants' "adaptation" to the American reality: the earlier assimilationist models, later multiculturalist approaches and more recent theories.

The third and most relevant part of this dissertation, "The American Dream Revisited," comprises eight chapters and constitutes a detailed analysis of how the American Dream is negotiated in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Jen's *Typical American* and the short story "In the American Society," and Lahiri's *The Namesake*, "The Third and Final Continent" "Hell-Heaven," and "Mrs. Sen's." I will first study the presence of individual versus collective Dreams to see if, in these immigrant narratives, the American Dream is essentially collective, as Hume claims, or on the contrary, is individualistic as it is understood in the non-ethnic discourse. I will next explore the "Evenic" vision of the Dream, in a Dream that has always been an "Adams' thing," and I will analyze the several "Eves" who are looking for their Dreams in these texts: Jasmine, Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid, Mrs. Sen, Aparna, Mala and Ashima, and also, the forgotten "Eves" in Ralph's Dream, Theresa and Helen. On the other hand, I will also study the different "Adams" and their relation with the Dream and also with their "Eves." In doing so, I will start with the quintessential Chinese American Adam, Ralph Chang, and I will continue with Lahiri's masculine characters, Mukherjee's "Adams" in *Jasmine*, and finally, Kingston's "Adams," personified in Moon Orchid's husband and the young Maxine's father. In subchapter 3.3, I will tackle a very significant element in (South) Asian American Literature, that is, "silence" and how silence affects these stories' female characters—and all the traditional and non-traditional implications this "gendered" silence has had, like madness or submission—and also, how silence can also shape "Adamic" destinies in America. In chapter 3.4, I will deal

with Anzaldúa's thesis on "Borderlands," and also, my personal interpretation, echoing Anzaldúa's idea, of "micro-societies." I will analyze the role of Jasmine as a "border woman," the particular and personal "spaces" where the Changs, Brave Orchid and Lahiri's protagonist live their Dreams. When discussing the personal spaces where these immigrant characters spend their days and lives, it is also important to deal with the distinction between domestic and public spaces/spheres. Echoing Gaston Bachelard and Wenying Xu seminal studies on space and food, respectively, my analysis of the stories will first explore the spaces where these characters dwell; next, I will try to discern the ways in which food works as an "ethnic marker" and, finally, I will discuss whether the domestic space and food are still exclusively related to women in these stories. In the following chapter, 3.6, I will address the controversial issue of "racialized bodies," as it is present in these stories, where the "racialized" and also "gendered" bodies, constitute a "barrier" to attaining a complete participation in the American Dream. In section 3.7, I will tackle the theme of the "shock of arrival," following Meena Alexander's thesis in her homonymous book, and the extent to which we witness how these characters transform their selves and their identities. In doing so, I will deal with Boelhower's idea of immigrant Bildungsroman intrinsically connected with the issue of self-transformation and considering, at the same time, how Boelhower's "Eurocentric" vision of the immigrant experience, echoing Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, can be applied to the Asian American Bildungsroman. I will scrutinize these (South) Asian American Eves' selves along with Ralph Chang's "refashioning" of his "self." In the last chapter of this third part (3.8), I will engage in an ecocritical reading of the American Dream in three major texts. It is my contention that Jasmine, "At the Western Palace" (in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*), and *Typical American* all render a more or less subtle critique of the corruption of the natural environment inherent in the American Dream. As I will explain in the following

chapters, nature has been a significant component of the Dream; from its conception, nature has been represented in the land, in the idea of a new, even virginal, world, and, as we will see in these texts, these later immigrants still dream of an “America” whose nature is still “green.”

In the concluding chapter, I will return to two important imaginary entities: “Imaginary Homelands” and “Imaginary Americas.” If the American Dream is simply no more than a dream, American is itself an illusion, an idea shaped by many generations of immigrants who have imagined their new lives in a new world different from their actual lives and homelands. The American Dream still nurtures our minds in the same way that it has nurtured this dissertation. America would not be the same if there were not a Dream and many generations of dreamers encouraging the myth. Thus, it is my intention to explore what this American Dream is like in contemporary immigrants’ narratives, and, in so doing, I intend to prove that the Dream has not lost its dreamers.

2. The American Dream: Origins and Destinies

Let me start with some explanation of the section's title. "Origins and Destinies" echoes the title that Silvia Pedraza and Rubén Rumbaut chose for their 1996 anthology, *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America*. Since this section explores the history of (South) Asian immigrants in America, the title "Origins and Destinies" befits, in my opinion, the contents of this chapter. Besides, as the "destination" for (South) Asian immigrants has been a shared one, America, I consider that the plural term "destinies" illustrates better the feeling of "uncertainty" embedded in these immigrants' Dreams in America.

The history of Chinese and Asian Indian immigrants in the United States has been filled with many difficulties and obstacles that had to be overcome in order for them to obtain a certain equality with other non-Asian immigrants in this country. In pursuing their American Dream, these communities have come up against intolerance, racism, and discriminatory laws. The idea of equality that the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the American Dream itself had proclaimed had nothing to do with the reality they encountered; opportunities were not equal for all individuals, contrary to what the Declaration maintained: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (3). In actual fact, the barriers Asian immigrants found on entering and settling in the "new world" were far more difficult than those faced by their non-Asian counterparts.

Richard Krickus puts figures to the American Dream when he maintains that the promise of better jobs and prosperity moved “approximately 23 million immigrants . . . in a forty-year period covering the 1880s to the 1920s” (55). The first wave of immigrants, predominantly Northern Europeans, had slowed down, according to Krickus, in the late 1880s, and was followed by subsequent waves of migrants up to the present day. Though it is worth noting the differences between the various phases of migration to America, in terms of countries of origin, and opportunities offered to the different groups, all pioneers and immigrants have shared the same feeling of being part of the Dream and of expecting a great future in America.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the coming of Asian immigrants to “the America of their dreams” has been characterized by a succession of immigration quotas, which particularly affected Chinese immigrants—for instance the 1879 Fifteen Passenger Bill and the even more drastic Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882—due to xenophobia, racism and the fears of losing a national “American identity” among the former settlers of the New World.³ Robert Blauner claims that the fact that Chinese and Asian Indians did not share “European ancestry and white skins” (“Colonized” 151) represented an obstacle in their acceptance in the “white” mainstream American society. Thus, “color” and “ethnicity” clearly matter when discussing the American Dream.

3 Sucheng Chan claims that the lack of a shared past and history in the United States constitutes the reason why the “American identity” is based on ideological principles (9), and in so far as ideologies can change, “can be learned and [be] mutable,” native-born Americans think that immigrants “must” adopt them because ideologies can be easily assimilated (9).

As Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong notes, everyone in the United States, with the exception of Native Americans,⁴ descends from immigrants who came to America from “somewhere else” (“Immigrant Autobiography” 143), and nowadays America continues to be the destination of worldwide migration. Today, according to the data provided by the 2010 Census Bureau, Asians represent the ethnic group which grew fastest between 2000 and 2010, comprising 5 per cent of the total.⁵ Therefore, immigration has shaped the essence and history of America, and the uninterrupted flow of immigrants coming to America makes it important for us to study and analyze these migrations as well as their circumstances and historical contexts. Both Chinese and Asian Indians suffered from exclusion rules and laws impeding their settlement in America. Before the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, America offered plentiful opportunities to immigrants who came from all over the world; there were neither barriers nor gates closing and restricting the flow of immigration. Hence, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act would symbolize the first step in series of biased immigration policies that proved to be racist and discriminatory.⁶

⁴ It is too often forgotten that Native Americans were already in America before the settlers and immigrants came to this country. Nevertheless, the way in which Native Americans “appear” in America, whether they are the first inhabitants or, on the contrary, the first immigrants, is still unclear. Even though the theory that assumes that Native Americans arrived in America from Asia over the Bering Strait during the last ice age is still widely accepted, in the last few years some scientists have reconsidered this thesis. On the other hand, most Native Americans oppose the Bering Strait thesis, alleging that the only objective of this hypothesis is to turn them into immigrants, dispossessing them of the land. See Deloria’s article, where he concludes that there is some interest in denying the fact that Native Americans were the first inhabitants of America.

⁵ According to the 2010 Census, the Asian population (Asian “race” alone) grew faster than any other major ethnic group between 2000 and 2010, increasing by 43%. Thus, “Asian alone” constitutes a percentage of 5% of total population, whereas “Asian alone or in combination” constitutes 6% of the total U.S. population. These percentages are below those of the Latin or Hispanic “race,” the group that represents the most important and populous “immigrant” community in America nowadays.

⁶ In 1852, the Foreign Miner’s License Tax was enacted by the California Government to “protect white Americans” and control the flow of Asian immigrants (Min 10). On the other hand, the Gentlemen’s Agreement (1907-08), stopped the Japanese migration to America. Exclusion laws such as the Asiatic Barred Zone in 1917 almost vetoed Asian immigration until World War II (Min 11). Furthermore, as Pyong Gap Min contends the Nationality Act of 1790 allowed just “Caucasians” be eligible for citizenship, thus making Asians and other non-European immigrants “undesirable” (12).

2.1. Chinese and South Asian Immigration: Commonalities and Differences

Before going any further, however, it is important to establish the multifarious differences existing within the general label “Asian American.”⁷ From a geographical point of view, the broad term “Asian American,” as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Amy Ling state, “designates people whose countries of origin may be found within the geographical triangle formed by Japan, Indonesia, and Pakistan” (4). As this dissertation deals with two very different Asian American groups, those of Chinese and Asian Indian origin, this geographical distinction becomes essential. According to Dingra Shankar and Rajin Srikan, Asians are divided into two differentiated groups: “those who originate from East/Southeast Asia—which includes China, Taiwan, the Koreas, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Philippines [sic]—and South Asia, which includes India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives [sic]” (ix). Karen Isaksen Leonard points out that the term “South Asia” is particularly used on “campuses and in political coalition,” and she maintains that the use of this term is a way of going back to the former “unit . . . and even beyond including Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and, according to some, even Burma and Afghanistan” (458). Thus, Leonard uses the term “Asian Indian” to refer to immigrants from India, clarifying that this is the designation used in the U.S. Census to refer to the immigrants from India (458). However, another author, Nazli Kibria, distinguishes between “Asian Indian” and “South Asian,” reserving the latter just to refer to peoples from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. In view of the different names that authors and critics assign to the geographical area

7 As I will discuss later, the term “Asian American” appeared in the late 1960s as the alternative to the term “Oriental” and the biased false stereotypes embedded in the latter.

and population, I will draw and keep the following distinction between “Asian Indian” and “South Asian” throughout this doctoral thesis. Following Kibria, I will use “Asian Indian” when discussing geographical, historical or political issues, as the exclusion acts were usually generalized to all Asian Indians. However, I prefer to use the more specific term “South Asian” when dealing with the literary discourses, as the writers studied in this dissertation, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee, are both of Bengali origin, and they are viewed within the context of South Asian American literature in the panorama of Asian American studies.

Furthermore, there are other types of distinctions among Asian immigrants, differences in terms of economic situation, educational background or other personal circumstances that encouraged their coming to America. Lisa Lowe points out that the heterogeneity of the Asian American category comes from “differences of Asian national origin, of generational relation to immigrant exclusion laws, of class backgrounds in Asia and economic conditions within the United States, and of gender” (*Immigrant Acts* 138). In “Theorizing Asian American Fiction,” Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai and Donald C. Goellnicht contend that recent demographic changes in Asian migrations to America have boosted a much more diverse Asian community, a heterogeneity that is also reflected in terms of language, religion, classes and political convictions (3). As a result, the increasing diversification in the Asian American population is also translated into what Sohn, Lai and Goellnicht have denominated a “chameleonic” Asian American body of fiction (4), with recent Asian American literary studies evincing the “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” that Lowe has claimed for them (60). Lowe insists on the heterogeneity of Asian Americans as an answer to a tendency that has seen “Asian-origin groups” as homogeneous (139). According to Lowe, Asian-origin immigrants faced exclusion laws and bars merely because they were seen as a homogeneous group under the “umbrella term” “Asian.”

Besides, Lowe maintains that the fact that Asians were seen as a “model minority,” that is, one of the most highly assimilated minority groups in the United States, which could “set an example” to other ethnic minorities, was another way of “homogenizing” Asians (139). Consequently, Lowe claims that differences in terms of gender, class, or nationality, should not be sacrificed for the sake of the “construction of sameness” (139).

From a historical perspective, the destinies of India and China have not been so estranged from each other as it might seem at first. After the sixteenth-century geographical division of “Eurasia” into Europe and Asia, the two main civilizations existing in Asia, according to Eurocentric interpretations, were “Confucian China” and India, “the land of ‘Hindus’” (Sucheta Mazumdar 143). This former partition was followed by a division of Asia into different religious blocs, as seen through the eyes of European missionaries (142)⁸. Afterwards, during the Enlightenment, significant figures of the period such as Voltaire, Montesquieu and Condorcet also centered on China and India in their study of Asia, finding little interest in the rest of Asian national and ethnic groups (144). In the European context prior to the earliest nationalist movements, back in the eighteenth century, the world was conceived and divided according to peoples and territories which shared a common religion or monarchy. Later on, with the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century that claimed differences of culture, “China and India arose as two nations ‘racially’ distinct” (Mazumdar 149). However, these emerging nationalist movements “absorbed the nineteenth century Euro-American racial models of history,” and, since the history of these two countries had come “via European mediators,” they ignored the individual histories of migrations that “contributed to the cultural richness, variety and diversity of the [Asian] continent” (150). Benedict Anderson, in his well-known *Imagined Communities*, demonstrated the widespread

⁸ Sucheta Mazumdar maintains that, for the influential Jesuit missionaries, the other peoples of Asia, “Japan, Ryukyus, Philippines, Indonesia, and so on, were not considered ‘model civilizations’” (143).

European influence on these colonized territories personified in the European attempts to classify and differentiate one group of “Others” from the “Others,” with the first “Others” becoming the ones who “nonetheless, are absolutely not to be confused with” the second “Others” (170).⁹ As Anderson claims, the origins of these differences are found in the first European invasion of Southeast Asia. During the late nineteenth century, European-style maps, censuses or museums were the classifying tools created to categorize those territorial domains in an attempt to create an “imaginary” colonial state where its members, following Anderson’s seminal thesis in *Imagined Communities*, had a “mental” idea of affinity among them.¹⁰

The First to Arrive: Chinese Immigrants and the “Yellow Peril”

The first Asian immigrants to come to America were the Chinese. According to Morrison G. Wong, their first entrance can be dated back to the 1700s (151). However, as I mentioned before, Chinese immigrants became numerous and significant in the middle of the nineteenth century.¹¹ The reasons that pushed Chinese people to emigrate to America were diverse in nature, including the discovery of gold in California and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad in the United States,¹² as well as poverty, famine, and political disorders in China. Therefore, the social and economic circumstances in their home countries

9 The “Other” has always been identified with negative perceptions, as Radhakrishnan shows, using as reference several cases taken from real news bulletins, where the ethnic other is depicted as a synonym of “violent, alien, criminal” (90).

10 For more about Anderson’s thesis, see section 2.3.

11 Catherine L. Brown and Clifton W. Pannell identify the year 1850 as the most intense period for Chinese emigration to America. San Francisco was the principal port of entry for Asian immigrants. Many newly arrived Chinese immigrants remained in California until the late 1860s (288).

12 Between 1850 and 1882, many Southern Chinese left their countries of origin heading for California and the West in order to work on the railroad as “cheap contract laborers,” but were soon perceived as a threat to the “white” laborers (Ngan-Ling Chow 113).

made Chinese emigrate to America in order to seek better economic opportunities, but there were also “pull factors” that encouraged them to leave their homelands: the promise of freedom in a new country that would provide them better jobs, land, and a new better life. Elaine Kim points out that, before Americans looked for Chinese laborers, there was already a “tradition for [Chinese] emigration to foreign lands” (96) especially from the villages of Southeast China to the United States, where those Chinese immigrants, mostly men, intended to earn money in order to support their families in China (96).

To claim that America proved to be not altogether welcoming to Asian immigrants is quite an understatement. Negative stereotypes and racist propaganda against Chinese immigrants proliferated all over the country. As Stuart Miller describes in his memorable *The Unwelcome Immigrant*, missionaries, traders and diplomats in China provided a “reliable” source of information about Chinese people and customs, reports that quickly spread in the United States (284). I deliberately put the adjective reliable within inverted commas above, as the perceptions of the Chinese elaborated by these three groups depended on the degree of their businesses’ success in a country, China, which the colonizers considered to be “Satan’s empire” (Miller 62). Sucheng Chan affirms that the “frustrations” of these three groups of Americans in China—missionaries, traders and diplomats—triggered the spread of negative perceptions about Chinese people in the United States (“Hostility and Conflict” 48). Missionaries saw few results in their holy task of converting the Chinese savages; traders found many obstacles to their businesses; and diplomats, according to Miller the most influential group due to their assumed expertise,¹³ produced several books depicting the uncivilized manners of a society, as a response to their disapproval of the Chinese court’s

13 According to Mazumdar, Jesuits were the most powerful missionary group at that time. They contributed to the image of a “Confucian” China in Europe as well as the creation of the notion of “Hindus” as a general term to refer to the people from India (143).

“elaborate protocol” (Chan 48). All this unfavorable propaganda was launched from newspapers of the time. Miller has examined a corpus of twenty-seven American newspapers of the period for reports and he concludes that the news concerning Chinese Taiping rebellions frequently made the headlines in the main American media of the time.¹⁴ However, the American press’s coverage of the Chinese insurgents went from showing an initial sympathy towards the mutineers to an unreserved condemnation of those rebellions late in 1854 (119). What remains relevant is the fact that, between 1850 and 1870, many newspapers published news articles about China and its peoples in the United States. Consequently, Americans started to ascertain the existence of a different civilization which had been largely ignored until then. This “discovery” was accompanied by further circulation of the negative and stereotypical stories and reports that missionaries, traders and diplomats had already recounted. Stories about rape or poisoning suffered by “whites” at the hands of the Chinese were transmitted in America, thus turning China into a “barbarian” society. In 1872, the *New York Times* described Chinese people as “incapable of civilization” (Miller 140). Furthermore, the biased propaganda launched by the major American newspapers, stereotyping the Chinese immigrants, was also fed by white workers who feared losing their jobs (Morrison Wong 151-52). This “anti-Chinese movement” was especially significant on the West coast of America, where the number of Chinese immigrants had been higher ever since the Gold Rush. The negative stereotypes of the Chinese population emerged. They were portrayed as “deviant” or “deficient” (Sucheng Chan 7); partly because some editors of the main American newspapers of the time considered the Chinese immigrants to be simply

14 The Taiping rebellions, were a series of insurrections among the Chinese population against the “Manchu conquerors,” (see Stephen R. Platt 12), which occurred during the Qing dynasty. These rebellions took place from 1851 to 1864; fourteen years of civil war that were one of the bloodiest conflicts of all time leaving millions of people dead. For a detailed description of this war, see Heath and Perry’s *The Taiping Rebellion 1851-66* (1994).

“‘imbeciles’ and incapable of progress” by nature (Miller 148)¹⁵. Hence, Horace Greeley, the editor of one of the most popular newspapers of the time, the *Tribune*, declared in 1854 that, “[t]he Chinese are uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order” (qtd. in Miller 169). Furthermore, the Chinese were seen as the main origin of diseases and germs because of the stereotypes reported about the filthy conditions in their lifestyle. In 1882, Chinese people, together with the “lunatics, idiots, and criminals,” were excluded by means of severe immigration policies based on “nationality” (Kim 96).¹⁶ Paul John Eakin details that the first “restrictive act of federal legislation,” that is, the 1882 Act, “excluded a specific racial type [sic] from the official American portrait gallery: the Chinese” (124).

These nationality-based quotas implementing and enforcing the exclusion of the Chinese from America lasted from 1882 to 1943, yet these exclusion policies were not only nationality-based but also gender-based. Very few Chinese women were allowed to enter in America, as Kim maintains, so as to control the “growth of the Chinese population” (97). Consequently, before 1945, most of the Chinese who lived in America were bachelors or “married bachelors” (Kim 97), who had left their wives and families in China. This situation led to the emergence of the so-called “bachelor societies.” According to Benito and Manzanos the “bachelor societies” stood for a “symbolic castration” of the Chinese American men, since these male communities were thus prevented from engendering new generations (366). Furthermore, intermarriage between Asian men and American women was not allowed, to the

15 See *The Coming Man: 19th Century Perceptions of the Chinese* (1994), as well as the aforementioned Miller’s *The Unwelcome Immigrant*

16 In *China Men* (1977), Maxine Hong Kingston devotes a whole chapter, “The Laws,” to enumerating the American exclusionary immigration laws in “The first years: 1868 to 1978.”

point that the American women could lose their citizenship if they married a Chinese man or got pregnant by a member of the “undesirable race.”¹⁷

The number of Chinese immigrants entering America was small during the decades when the American exclusion laws were enforced; in 1943, when China became the ally of the United States against the Japanese in World War II, things changed radically: exclusion laws were repealed and the United States “allow[ed] those of the first generation in this country to naturalize for citizenship” (Ng x). Following this pattern, in 1946 the time came for Filipinos and Asian Indians to obtain their naturalization. However, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s, following the Civil Rights movement,¹⁸ that Asian Americans started to fight for their rights and voice in America. The Civil Rights movement, initially an African American struggle, ultimately “cleared the way for other contemporary non-white immigrant groups to come to America” (Morris and Herring 222). Asian Americans were not a “model minority” any more. The Asian American movement was spearheaded by scholars of Asian origin in the different campuses throughout the country. They demanded a reinterpretation of “Asian American history in the United States” (Wei 37), and they tried to change the socio-political conditions of their communities. The end of Exclusion Acts and immigration quotas came with the 1965 Immigration Act,¹⁹ whereby immigrants could finally enter the country and stay in America and were eligible to become citizens. After a long time, Asian

17 Kim points out that intermarriage between Chinese immigrants and American citizens was considered to “improve the Asian [sic],” as the children would be “taller” and “handsomer.” Nevertheless, the threat of a stronger and more numerous “yellow race” was a risk that America could not allow (10). Chinese “aliens,” were the racialized “Other(s)” from Asia, “excludable, undesirable” (Wu and Chen 148), those “races” which were expelled and excluded by means of the several Exclusion Acts. In Asian Americans, Sucheng Chan employs the term “undesirable” to refer to Asian immigrants in the United States.

18 Actually, as Morris and Herring claim, the Civil Rights Movement, promoted by Black activists, became a “model of social protest for many other oppressed groups in America and throughout the world” (222).

19 Muller points out that with the 1965 “amendments to the McCarran-Walter Act” the national quotas were abolished. With the 1969 Hart-Cellar Act, immigration from countries such as China and India increased (6).

immigrants could share the same civil rights that other American citizens had, on equal terms. What is important about the post-1965 Chinese American immigrants is the fact that the Chinese American community could finally move beyond the paradigm of the “bachelor’s community,” as Nancy Foner points out in *Across Generations: Immigrants Families in America* (23).

The very idea of “family” for those early Chinese immigrants, as Sucheng Chan explains, differed from the typical nuclear family and even encompassed fellow villagers: “Associations formed by Asian immigrants, like those created by immigrants of other origins, provided mutual aid to their members and served as settings where coethnics could partake of warmth and conviviality” (63). Like other immigrants hailing from Asia, the Chinese often “organized themselves” on the basis of “primordial ties, such as the common locality or dialect, kinship bonds, and religious affinity” (63). Thus, the first Chinese American families were integrated not only by those relatives who shared the same blood, but also by other Chinese people who maintained geographic or religious bonds with each other. However, post-1965 Chinese immigrants and second-generation Chinese Americans are no longer circumscribed to the old Chinatowns across the country. They come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and they find a wide range of jobs according to their education, though, as Min Zhou claims and as I will consider in section 3.1, there are still some socioeconomic barriers when a Chinese American wants to occupy a higher job position (50). The social transformations that the Chinese American community has undergone since 1965 has also triggered the emergence of a new type of social and community profile, called “ethnoburb,” a response to the old ghettos and Chinatowns.²⁰ However, despite this Asian suburbanization and the transnational networks which facilitate a new type a Chinese

20 For more about “ethnoburb,” see section 3.1.

immigration to the United States, Chinese immigrants were still in the 1990s, as Claudia Sadowski affirms, one of the most numerous groups in “border crossing,” using the Mexican and Canadian frontier as main gates to enter in America (46). Chinese immigration to America has become more diverse than it used to be. Thus, contemporary Asian American immigrations have fundamentally changed in two aspects: the flow and the inner group diversity, and also, the settlement of these new immigrants “outside Chinatown.”²¹

Not Caucasian, not “Yellow”: South Asian Immigrants and the “New Menace” to America

The struggle for the acceptance of Asian Indian immigrants in America was equally strenuous. After the abolition of slavery, (South) Asian immigrants become one of the “two main groups of nonwhite international migrant workers” (Sucheng Chan 4). In the case of South Asians, their “racial difference” was not so clear at the initial stages of migration. As a matter of fact, “anthropologists classified some of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent as ‘Aryans,’” but they could not confirm that Aryans were also Caucasians, as the latter label was referred “only to whites” (S. Chan 55). Finally, with the 1917 Immigration Act and the establishment of an imaginary geographical line, the “Barred Zone,” South Asians were finally excluded. The “Barred Zone” comprised those territories from the “Red to the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Black Seas, through the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea, along the Ural River, and then through the Ural Mountains” (S. Chan 55). In the eyes of American immigration laws, Chinese and Asian Indians shared an identical geographic

21 According to Nancy Foner, currently, only two percent of the Chinese population in Los Angeles lives in old Chinatown; the same has happened with San Francisco, where eight percent still lives in Chinatown and in New York City, where the old Chinatown has been until now the place for fourteen percent of the Chinese American population (24).

origin, the far and unfamiliar East.²² As a result, Asian Indians were excluded in the same way as the Chinese. Asian Indian immigration started later and was demographically less significant than Chinese immigration. However, these immigrants' prospects and hopes were not dissimilar to those of other immigrants in this new land.

Gary R. Hess establishes the year 1820 as the first moment that Asian Indian immigrants set foot on American land (106). Between 1907 and 1920, a significant number of Indian immigrants entered America in order to work as agricultural workers, settling down in California (Hess 106), while others worked in the lumber industry of Washington. By 1910, the number of Asian Indian workers increased due to the expansion of "agribusiness" (Jensen 30).²³ Baidya Nath Varma adds that in 1910, there were 5,000 Asian Indian immigrants at San Francisco. These first immigrants, who came to California in order to work as farmers, were mainly Sikhs from the Punjab, though some of these farm laborers, according to Takaki, had previously worked on the railroad (302). Apart from these agricultural workers, there were other social groups—Hindu preachers, ambitious students of well-off families, businessmen, and also, as Varma identifies, young revolutionaries from Bengal, Maharashtra and the Panjab [sic]—that came from India, due to the "revolutions in transportation and communications" that were taking place in modern India (Varma 6-7). Takaki confirms that, by 1920, "some sixty-four hundred [Asian Indians] had entered the United States" (294). The economically favorable situation encouraged many Asian Indian students to exchange their destination from Britain to America. Such a change of countries can be read as a way of

22 However, Chinese immigrants, were already labeled as "Mongolians" in the Civil Code in 1905. As Chan recounts in *Asian Americans: An Interpretative History*, the "yellow peril" in 1905 instituted a steadfast revision of the Civil Code to forbid marriages between "whites" and "Mongolians," as Chinese and Japanese immigrants were then labelled. In 1933, the appellate court established five "racial groups": "Caucasian (white), Mongolian (yellow), Ethiopian (black), American (red), and Malay (brown . . .)" (68). The negative connotations embedded in the term "Mongol(oid)" have persisted during a substantial period of time, becoming a synonym of "low intellectual level," or "handicap."

23 Sucheng Chan reports that, by 1908, there were three groups that helped Asian Indians to come to America: "steamship companies," "labor contractors," and "Indian pioneers themselves" (22).

countering nationalist pressure against British rule. In this sense, one peculiarity of Asian Indian immigration to America was the confused political situation that the South Asian subcontinent was undergoing, since the British imperialist project had effectively turned the Indian population into subjects of the British crown.²⁴ The particular political environment that existed in the Indian subcontinent also unsettled Indians abroad. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Indian immigrants were excluded from entering Canada at the request of Great Britain (Varma 50), as Canada was still a “dominion” of the British Empire at that time. As Varma claims, Indians were considered, from a political point of view, “the weakest Asian ethnic group in America” (54), ranking below the Chinese and Japanese.

Although the contingent of Asian Indian immigrants in the United States was less numerous than the Chinese and Japanese ones, the first arrivals were alienated in the same way that the other two groups had been in America. In 1907 Indians were also “declared ineligible to naturalization” and, from 1910 onwards, the number of Asian Indian immigrants entering in the United States dropped dramatically (Varma 50). Takaki specifies that, between 1908 and 1920, around 3,453 Asian Indian immigrants were refused, “most of them on the grounds they would likely become public charges” (297). “Hindus”²⁵ were considered a “menace to American culture” (Varma 58), they were the carriers of “contagious diseases”: a veritable “avalanche of death from Himalayas” (56).²⁶ Asian Indian immigrants came face to

24 China also endured the Opium Wars against the British Crown as a result of the increasing trade problems between the two countries during the nineteenth century. The first Opium War (1839-42) ended with China as loser. As a consequence, many Chinese people lost their jobs while addiction to opium continued to increase. The second Opium War (1856-60), ended by the Treaty of Tianjin, meant further concessions from China. Curiously one of the clauses of this Treaty forbade the use of the term “barbarian” to refer to Chinese people (Hanes and Sanello 218).

25 These first immigrants were called “Hindus” meaning ‘people from ‘Hindustan,’ or India” (Leonard 459). Sucheng Chan also remarks the derogatory use of the term ‘Hindoos’ to refer to Punjab migrants (75), as they were not Hindu, but mostly Sikh.

26 R. Hess enumerates some of the negative stereotypes related to Asian Indians: “untrustworthy, unsanitary, insolent, and lustful” (580). As I commented before, the Chinese were also filthy and a “peril” to “white” America. Thus, both, Chinese and Asian Indians were not welcomed in America, and as a result, those who entered had to undergo vile judgments and worse attitudes.

face with the same bigotry the Chinese had met before them. However, the difference in the number of people coming to America, and the fact that Chinese immigration was the most numerous, contributed to making the Chinese even more “undesirable.”²⁷

While a great number of Asian Indians settled on the West coast of California, attracted by the propaganda and expectations of finding jobs there, there were some South Asians who went to Washington, as I already mentioned. What is important at this point is to highlight the negative response that the white population in Washington gave to these Asian Indian immigrants. They were seen as a threat to the white people’s jobs, as they were prepared to work more hours for less money. In 1907, in Bellingham, Washington, racial riots provoked many Asian Indians to flee across the Canadian border (Hess 1974: 579). Later, in Everett, many Asian workers were forced to leave the city. The few who remained faced the racial prejudices that often emerged among the “white” population, who even warned each other against selling a property to a “Hindu.” As Hess poignantly describes, once ““Hindoos or Negroes’ settled in an area, according to their white neighbors, they “depreciated [the] value of adjacent property and injured the reputation of the neighborhood, and [were] generally considered as undesirable”” (Hess 580). Consequently, Asian Indian workers in the railroad and lumber industries were progressively heading south, getting employment in California as farmers (Takaki 302). As we have seen, Asian Indians were not the only targets of “racial” violence that forced them to leave many American cities; in the late nineteenth century, the Chinese had already experienced the tragedy of being killed, burned and, in the best of the cases, ostracized, just because their “racialized” bodies. Therefore, the “destinies”

27 During the nineteenth-century period when the American population “discovered” the existence of “far” China and India, religious periodicals often spread an inaccurate and biased picture of this Asian Empire, and one popular publication, *The Panoplist*, illustrates the missionaries’ vision of the Birman people as follows: “They are vigorous, intelligent, and tractable, and in many respects superior to the Hindoos” (241). According to *The Panoplist*, the Birman Empire, located, at that time, between “Hindoostan” and “China,” offered the Christian missionaries a suitable field for their religious mission, since it was a much more “advanced civilization” (241). Since this reference to the Birman Empire can bring to mind “Burmese” echoes, it is important to differentiate the old Birman Empire and the present-day state of Burma, renamed Myanmar.

that awaited Asian Indian and Chinese immigrants in America, did not differ as much as expected: both communities faced the tragedy of violent exclusions and anti-“racial” movements. Nevertheless, the anti-Chinese rioting was, as Roger Daniels contends, much more violent and bloody.²⁸

The 1917 Exclusion Act was the first American law that established differences within the same group of Asian Indian immigrants. Students, some “skilled religious practitioners,” and businessmen could settle in America (75), but their compatriots who came from the villages and were not literate were deemed ineligible to be members of the American society. In 1924, restrictions affected the lives of Asian Indians: “Family reunions, landownership, and citizenship” were declared “outside their ‘racial’ eligibilities” (Varma 128). In 1946, the immigration laws reduced to 100 the annual quota of Asian Indian immigrants coming to the United States. This situation would not change until the mid-sixties. Asian Indian women immigrants were not numerous, and the same anti-miscegenation laws that had been applied to the Chinese were also applied to Asian Indians in certain states. Between 1947 and 1965, a significant number of Asian Indian immigrants could enter the United States as a consequence of the repeal of the exclusion quotas against the Chinese (Hess 592), which affected Asians in general.

After the initial fear of a “Hindu invasion” (Hess 106) subsided and the 1965 Immigration Act was passed, Asian Indian immigration to America increased notably, in the same way that Chinese, Japanese and Korean immigration did. Writing in 1998, Morrison Wong maintained that between 1965 and the 1980s Asian migration “increased

28 In *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850*, Daniels conjures up all those terrible episodes that Chinese immigrants underwent in the violent “American West.” In the anti-Chinese riot that occurred in 1871 in Los Angeles, “twenty-one Chinese were shot, hanged, or burned by white mobs” (Daniels 59). Los Angeles’ turmoil was the beginning of more tragic “racist” episodes against Chinese in America. In *Asian American*, Daniels contends that the worst episode of racial barbarity that Chinese immigrants suffered happened after the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (69).

tenfold” (206), and by 2010, he predicted that the total Asian population was “expected to have doubled” (217), as people followed “family-chain” migration.²⁹ Current figures show that between 2000 and 2010, Asians (those of Asian “race” alone) were the major ethnic group which grew fastest, increasing by 43% (see above n5). In comparison to the early Asian immigrants, those arriving since 1965 have been characterized by being educated and qualified professionals. In fact, Johanna Lessinger asserts that the new immigration laws have favored skilled and wealthy Asian Indians “giving [them] preference in migrating” (3). Thus, since the year 1965, the number of Asians moving to America has progressively increased, to such an extent that they have become one of the most important immigrant communities in America. Lessinger points out that more than 191,000 Indians came to America just between 1961 and 1980 (4). According to Sucheng Chan “until that year [1965], the immigrant stream had been predominantly European, with sizable contributions from the western hemisphere, particularly Canada and Mexico, since the 1920s. But after the 1965 law went into effect, Asian immigration has increased so steadily that Asians now compose more than a half of the total influx” (145). The differences between the “old migration” and the post-1965 “new migration” is that the Asian immigrants are more qualified than they used to be, and, according to Lessinger, they belong to an “urban middle class” of professionals (4). Nowadays, most of the Asian Indian immigrants are professionals with a postgraduate education, as well as graduate students who aim to get a doctoral degree from American universities. In *Multicultural America: An Encyclopedia of the Newest Americans*, Ronald Bayor equally identifies the diversity that characterizes the new post-1965 Asian Indian immigrants: they are not rural people anymore, but highly educated professionals (Bayor

²⁹ Morrison Wong maintains that the “family-chain” migration is a process whereby, once a member of a family gets the citizenship, after five years of residence, his/her relatives follow her/him and they move up on the priority list for entrance in the United States (209).

976). They mainly cluster in medical occupations as well as in “Silicon Valley internet-based economy” (980). Bayor also indicates that Asian Indian women have undergone an important change in terms of their presence within the business context, a surprising role if we consider that most Asian Indian women would not probably work back in their homelands at the time (Bayor 982). Thus, the panorama of the (South) Asian immigrants in America has substantially changed since 1965. As we will see in the stories analyzed in the following chapters, all of the (South) Asian immigrant characters in our corpus have come to America to participate in the promise of being “self-made” that the American Dream has nurtured and continues to do. It does not matter how many years have passed and how many exclusion acts immigrants have come up against, the myth of the American Dream still endures and shapes the “American dreamers.”

2.2. The American Dream: The Origin of a Notion/Nation

There are other beautiful lands, other free societies, and other wealthy nations, but America is “exceptional” because it is the home of an idea—and that idea is the American Dream. But the ideas have to be realized, they have to be embodied in the lives of real people, before they have weight and substance.

Cal Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream*.

From the “discovery” of America by the first European pioneers when they arrived in the “virgin” land in 1492,³⁰ there has been one common goal, the pursuit of a dream. This dream was the motivation that made so many families begin a new life in a New World. America, the New World, gave those people the chance to start again and to believe that they could make their dreams come true.

The origin of the term “American Dream” can be traced back to the thirties, during the period known as the Great Depression. The phrase “American Dream” was first coined by Walter Lippman in 1914 in *Drift and Mastery*, when he referred to Thomas Jefferson’s vision of the American man as a “free and independent farmer,” a notion that lost its validity in the twentieth century (Jillson). Nevertheless, the person who brought this term into general use was James Truslow Adams in the 1930s. In *The Epic of America* (1932), he recounts the

30 I use quotation marks since “discovery” is quite a controversial term. On the one hand, it reminds us of a colonial and imperialist past that aimed to “discover,” and “explore” new lands; on the other hand, by using the term “discovery,” we obviously forget the first “inhabitants” of America, that is, Native Americans. I use inverted commas when I refer to inhabitant because the controversy that surrounds the theories that try to explain how Native Americans originally came to this country.

historical chronicle of the foundation of America, as well as the hopes and dreams which encompassed the colonization of the new world. As Adams enthuses, in “those who took part in the great migration, [there] was also frequently present the hope of a better and freer life” (31). At the end of the book, Adams suggests that in spite of, or, rather, due to the unfavorable situation that America was undergoing at that time, during the Great Depression, it was all the more urgent to expect a better future, since the “alternative [would be] the failure of self-government, the failure of the common man to rise to full stature, the failure of all that the American dream has held of hope and promise for mankind” (416). Although the American Dream has been and still is questioned, it continues to embody much the same hopes that Adams envisioned early in the last century.

During the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, America was seen as the “virgin” continent by “dreamers” such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin.³¹ Jefferson and Franklin, two of the “Founding Fathers” of the United States, believed in the possibility of constructing a new reality in America. The “new world” represented the opportunity to establish social values and codes which were totally different from those existing in old Europe (Wright 534). Walter Allen maintains that “the first statement of the dream” (4) appeared in the Declaration of Independence in 1776, which promulgated, promoted and encouraged Americans to engage in the “pursuit of happiness” (“Declaration” 3), that is, in the pursuit of their dreams. Jefferson, Franklin and Adams saw in America a new beginning where they could improve or rectify all the negative aspects present in the “vicious” old

31 In *Franklin: The Essential Founding Father*, James Srodes contends that Franklin submitted an argument to the Congress claiming that “a virgin state should preserve the virgin character and not go about suitoring [sic] for alliances. . . .” (Srodes 287). Franklin was answering a letter he had received from a French scientist promoting the American independence.

Europe, thus creating a better society.³² America gave them the opportunity to imagine “new social and esthetic values, to formulate new laws, and virgin soil in which to plant the new institutions” (Wright 535). In “Self and Nation in Franklin’s *Autobiography* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*,” Ana María Manzanás discusses the imbrication between “I” and “Nation” present throughout Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Manzanás contends that Franklin positively believes in the possibility that individuals have to grow and improve, in such a way that he compares “himself,” the “I” of his empowering discourse, with America, and its prospects of becoming a great nation.

The term “American Dream” is thus related to ideals such as prosperity, wealth, freedom, better life conditions, that is, a successful positive change in one’s life (Nepo 25). Daniel Boorstin maintains that the term American Dream is the most accurate way of “describing the hopes of men [sic] in America” (240). The “American dream” was the inspiration for many people who saw the new American land as a chance to make a fresh start. Their arrival in the new continent meant a turning point for those individuals in search for a new beginning: “This ‘new’ continent seemed to offer the last great hope for ‘mankind’ to begin again and put right all the wrongs of the Old World” (Campbell and Kean 27).

The American Adam and the Triumph of Individualism

The individualistic character of American society renders the American Dream an individual pursuit. St-Jean de Crèvecoeur affirmed in his *Letters from an American Farmer* that in America, the “rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his

32 As is well-known, Benjamin Franklin, considered as an epitome of the “American Dream made true” and the new American man, was himself a self-made man in all different areas of his life. He was a “printer, investor, politician, scientist, diplomat, and philanthropist” (Jillson 16). In his *Autobiography*, Franklin supports the idea that any “man” can grow and become whoever “he” wants: “I was bred a farmer, and it was a folly in me to come to town, and put myself, at thirty years of age, an apprentice to learn a new trade” (184).

labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest” (55).³³ Individual work and effort allows every and any human being to rise and achieve their dreams. The emphasis on individualism is something intrinsic in the American society.³⁴ Charles Sanford contends that American individualism stems from the American Adam’s inherent disposition to “assert himself against” any existing limitations (32). Many Americanists, when discussing the origin of the autobiography, see Franklin’s *Autobiography* as the paradigm of the American character, as it proclaims individualism and its final success as the quintessential element of the “American temperament” (27). In Manzanas’s article mentioned above, she argues that the close identification “I/nation” in Franklin’s *Autobiography* links the individual’s achievements and life with the national life (37). Manzanas maintains that American autobiographers tend to nurture the connection between their lives and the country’s. Franklin’s individualist discourse—where he praises his own ability and effort to become the man he is—serves as example for America and its people.

According to Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzanas, one of the most common themes in American literature is the theme of the individual’s journey from one part of the country to another, leaving one’s land and past behind.³⁵ This recurrent motif has contributed to building the myth of American individualism, personified in the figure of the “American Adam,” the lonely hero who wanders the country searching for a “fresh start.” At the same time, the myth

33 Note the sexist use of the pronoun throughout the quotation. Intentionally or not, Crèvecoeur like many of his contemporaries, uses the sexist word “man,” “mankind,” etc. Since this dissertation focuses principally on the work of woman writers and the importance of the American Eve in the immigration literature I would rather use the terms “human being,” “humankind,” etc., except when quoting.

34 According to Robert S. Levine, the affirmation of individualism occurred during the Protestant Reform, which can be deemed to be the beginning of the “American reform” (132). Moreover, as Levine argues, at the beginning of the mid-nineteenth century—between the 1820s and 1830s—there was a set of movements—abolitionism, feminism, etc.—all of which aimed to emphasize the importance of the individual in determining his/her own destiny (132).

35 As is well known, the motif or pattern of the journey stems in American culture from the first settlers, mostly Evangelical religious groups, America, who headed for the West to establish a “New Jerusalem,” as the Jews had in the Old World (Sanford 32).

of the American Adam is interwoven with the myth of the American dream. Benito and Manzanas explain this connection by evoking the European Renaissance concept of “the individual,” which stresses how a person is able to achieve and become whoever he/she hopes to be. Thus, the American Adam would correspond to the Renaissance’s individual who can “make himself/herself,” accomplishing his/her dreams, which is in fact the “renaissance” of a new individual (349). As Stephen Greenblatt contends in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, in the sixteenth century there was an “increased self-consciousness” about human identity, up to the point that it was thought that individuals could change and shape their “selves” in an “artful process” (2). Greenblatt offers a view of the “self” as something malleable, thus contributing to reinforce the individualistic idea present in the Renaissance “self.” Hence, as Benito and Manzanas contended above, it seems that there was a clear parallelism between the European Renaissance’s individualism and the individualistic character that lies at the core of the American identity.

R. W. B. Lewis, in his seminal *The American Adam* (1955), traces the theme of the American Adam in the works of the authors who have contributed to the creation and development of this myth throughout American literary history. Lewis explores the first references to this hero in Emerson and Thoreau, contending that Thoreau refreshed Emerson’s Adam by a “total renunciation of the traditional,” the past, in order to attain a “total immersion in nature” (21). In *Walden* (1854), Thoreau evoked the myth of the American Adam as the individual who could reinvent himself many times in the New World. Lewis also maintains that a “new” American Adam appears in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) by Walt Whitman, where the hero “radiates a kind of primal innocence in an innocent world” (49). At the same time, Lewis contends that Whitman inaugurated a major theme in American literature, “loneliness,” personified in the isolated individual “standing flush with

the empty universe, a primitive moral and intellectual entity” (50). Whitman believed in the possibility for Adam to give birth to a new self, alone, creating himself prior to building up his home (50). Franklin, Jefferson or Crèvecoeur had already laid the ground for this idea of the lonely “self-made” man, envisaging a new “man” able to forge his own destiny with effort and work.

What is more important and relevant to the aims of this dissertation is the fact that the dream imagined by the aforementioned authors was an individual one, personified in the figure of the new Adamic hero in his solitary venture. Lewis maintains that this lonely hero is one of the first examples of the “self-made man” (49). Whitman describes this hero as “amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary; especially unitary and certainly very easily amused; too complacent, we frequently feel, but always compassionate [...]” (Lewis 101). The American Adam symbolized the new hero in the new world, America. The role of this hero in the new paradise, Viorica Pâtea argues, can be explained if we review the story of the biblical Adam. The “fall” that the biblical Adam underwent, as well as his consequent expulsion from paradise “enables him to become another and becoming another is made possible only through a process of estrangement from the self” and from “nature” (16). Adam will recover his position in the new world, the new Eden that America represents for him. Pâtea maintains that American history starts with the myth of the American Adam in the new world, the new Eden, “since its wilderness appeared to early settlers in the guise of a primitive paradise” (17).

Yet, as David W. Noble contends, only in America could this new hero literally exist, since only in America, in contrast with Europe, could an individual become the person(s) he

had always dreamt of becoming.³⁶ Noble relates the figure of the American or new hero to the vision of nature the European Romantics had in the nineteenth century. The Romantics in Europe dreamt of a hero who had the strength to move beyond all the social and even “natural” limitations that used to confine human beings, in order to go further, and attain his/her freedom by “achieving organic union with nature” (Noble 4). The American Adam personified the birth of a nation in a new land “supposedly ‘discovered’ late in history by European explorers, founded by Puritans, and inhabited by settlers who saw themselves as the first protagonists of the New World” (Pâtea 17). Therefore, in America it was possible for every individual to get this Romantic vision, as in this new continent every human being could “rise above his [sic] personal weaknesses,” because “every individual was in close contact with nature” (Noble 5).

In *Revisions of the American Adam*, Jonathan Mitchell argues that the American Adam “actualizes” the American Dream: if the dream comes true, there will be a return to an early “idealized state of innocence” (11), an innocence, as Mitchell interprets it, that was lost when the American Adam gained awareness of the situation. The new American Adam becomes aware of the reality of decay, and at this moment his innocence is lost. Mitchell also argues about the “masculine” character of the Dream and, consequently, of the myth of Adam. It becomes obvious that, as I have maintained from the beginning of this dissertation, women have historically been bypassed in the construction of both myths.

Indeed, in *The Machine in the Garden*, where Leo Marx explores and evaluates the tradition of the pastoral idea in the American discourse, he points out the Elizabethan image of America as a garden, where the unspoiled virgin land served as a “setting for a pastoral

36 I intentionally use the plural “person” since the myth of the American Adam encouraged the possibility to start anew but not only once. A person could “fall” and “stand up” and start a new life again; it would involve an ongoing “rebirth” which still is the main premise of the Dream.

utopia” 73). The American landscape, as Marx evokes, was seen by those first European dreamers as the space where all positive values and qualities could be found. In this “nature’s garden,” prolific and “regenerative,” the relationship between “man” and nature was absolutely crucial, as nature gave individuals the chance to “shape” their lives. As is well known, in *Notes on Virginia* (1785), Jefferson developed his “agrarian ideal”: Jefferson “saw the cultivator of the earth, the husbandman who tilled his own acres, as the rock upon which the American republic must stand” (Smith 128). According to Marx, there was a movement towards the country, the natural landscape, that is, a “motion away from centers of civilization toward . . . nature,” which stood for “simplicity” (10).³⁷ Nevertheless, by 1844 the machine had appeared in the garden as the symbol of scientific and social progress. In “Two Kingdoms of Force,” Marx analyzes Henry Adams’s fatalism, trying to conjure up the historian’s vision of society and history itself in terms of a clash between two forces: “Arcadia” versus technology, that is, the Virgin and the Dynamo (86). Marx explains how the close relation between man and nature started to change in the nineteenth century, though the pastoral ideal remained “long after the machine’s appearance in the landscape” (226). It has also been argued that, as happened to the Adamic figure, the garden also lost its original innocence when “scientific progress” and “the dreams of material enrichment” started to guide American society (Pâtea 32)³⁸.

37 In *The Pilot and the Passenger* (1988), Marx introduces the ecological perspective, relating man with nature (139). Ecology, as he maintains, was already present in the works of some nineteenth-century American writers (139), when they dealt with “the maintenance of a healthy life-enhancing interaction between man and environment” (139).

38 The American garden is where Adam exists and both Adam and the garden need each other in order to exist. The American garden is an illusionary paradise where Adam is free and where he can achieve his self-fulfillment. Obviously, as Pâtea emphasizes, in the garden there are no traces of evil or sin, as happens with the quintessential innocent Adam, until the “machine” invades it (30). As we can observe, there is one important element missing in this ideal: the American Eve, the biblical counterpart of Adam.

The West and the Last Frontier

The romantic idea of the hero in communion with nature brings up another important ingredient in the “American concoction”: the frontier, construed as the land which motivated the first settlers and pioneers to continue in search of the unknown. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, the history of America is itself the history of the colonization of the Great West.³⁹ America offered the settlers and immigrants the opportunity for a “new order of things” (262), that is, the chance to create a new society and the attempt to avoid the mistakes of old Europe. The West, Turner argues, is a “form of society, rather than an area” (206), where social conditions emerge from the application of older patterns to a new land. Thus, “newness” is going to define all the institutions and ideals that grow in this area. Turner asserts that it is at this point when the former wilderness of this area disappears and it becomes a new society, whereas the West “passes on to a new frontier” (206). Therefore, the creation of the American nation has been an incessant “rebirth,” a continuous process of “beginning over again on the frontier” (Turner 3). The “open range” that America offered to the first settlers entailed the chance of a new beginning. Turner’s frontier is the “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Smith 251). The wilderness outside the frontier meant a “blank page” (Turner 262), “a gate of escape from the bondage of the past” (Turner 38). The wilderness that the landscape offered the new immigrant, the farmer, the pioneer, gave them the opportunity of a fresh start in their lives. Most of these early pioneers had left behind political, economic and, in some cases, criminal burdens. Living in the new world meant that they could start their life anew, as if their past, including their wrong chapters, did

³⁹ Turner underscores that the West, “as a phase of social organization, began with the Atlantic coast, and passed across the continent” (206).

not count. Consequently, the West gave the first settlers the chance to dream about a new world, a new land far away from civilized Old Europe, its restrictions and norms. The West gave them hope.

The frontier is related to the individualistic character so recurrently ascribed to Americans, because it was the frontier that built “the nomadism of Americans, their mobility” (Allen 56). Furthermore, as Turner points out, this individualism was also a paradigm to follow in the new societies, as they aimed to preserve “individual will and work” and not sacrifice it for the sake of the “collective interest” (306). In American literature, the frontier has been a significant pattern, as it has represented a “symbolic territory” where all the aspirations and fears of the individuals live together (Mogen 17). For David Mogen, the frontier comes to be a liminal space in the setting where the “Old World (‘civilization’) and a New World (associated with ‘nature’ and/or ‘wilderness’)” coexist (24). It is the the American hero’s role, according to this author, to solve the conflicts between these two “opposing” worlds. This hero, whom Mogen also identifies as the western “cowboy,” is the American Adam of *Leaves of Grass*, a lonely and innocent man living in a pristine new world.

A New World Free from Sin

As can be gleaned from the previous survey, there are several ubiquitous and recurrent elements associated with the American Dream, namely: the frontier, the American Adam, the “Franklinian” self-made man,⁴⁰ which we have explored in the previous sections,

40 The myth of the American Adam and the “self-made man” are to some extent interwoven, albeit different. The American Adam has an obviously religious character, set up by the Puritans and their ideals of creating a new innocent “man” in the new world; the “self-made man” motif harks back to Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, where he emphasizes the “rags-to-riches” narrative, that is, the hope that a “man” from humble origins, like himself, could become whoever he planned to be with effort and work. As Todd W. Nothstein’s dissertation reveals, Frederick Douglas’s 1845 narrative also addresses the “self-made man” motif, though with a slightly different perspective, since it is imbued with “shame” (VIII).

and the primal innocence related to this hero, deeply embedded in the American character, which will be analyzed in what follows. The original innocence replaced doctrines of the individual's original sin and guilt, stemming from Christian theology, specifically John Calvin's Protestant doctrine, and followed by the Puritans in the new world⁴¹. The Puritans wanted to create a "new man," liberated from all the sins he had committed in the Old World. Encouraged by the doctrine of "Manifest Destiny," Puritans distinguished themselves from the other Christian colonizers of America—Spaniards and Portuguese—by conceiving the "territory itself as sacred" (Stephanson 6), using the Bible and the "natural law" (25) as the instruments to "colonize" the New World. Nathaniel Hawthorne asserted that the myth of the American Adam existed before 1740, as the product of the English thinkers of 1600, who, according to Noble, "supposed that it was possible to flee from the sinfulness of old England to the innocence of New England" (25).⁴² Once again, the identification of the new land with the ideas of newness and innocence is relevant. However, as Jillson maintains, the reality of the Puritan vision in the new world has "little to do with individualism" and "freedom" (27). The beauty, "freedom," and "innocence" of the New World is obscured by the Puritans' intentions, imbued with severity and punishment, as Hawthorne proclaims in *The Scarlet Letter*, opening as it does with the first settlers' plans to build a cemetery and a prison, which respectively stand for two places to redeem oneself, by "grace of God" or by "grace of human justice" (45). Noble (25) reminds us that Hawthorne did not believe in "the saving remnant," those "chosen" few, or, in Noble's words, those "cleansed and purified people" who would be

41 According to Calvin's *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, the doctrine of Predestination entails several interdependent ideas such as "creator and creature, man's will and determinism, ground and cause, guilt and punishment" (13). In Calvin's mind, "man" is responsible for his sin and "wrongdoing": "sin is not God's hidden counsel, but the will of man" (19). The Renaissance and the humanist movement would also foster an alternative interpretation of the Fall as something that could be avoided by the individual (Harrison 243; cf. Hall 6).

42 R.W.B. Lewis maintains that Hawthorne used the myth of Adam and his "re-creation" as a metaphor of the American individual "before and after the Fall" (111).

entitled to live “in a heavenly city on earth” (103). Hawthorne’s criticism of Puritanism lies precisely in the empathy he feels for and expresses towards Hester, in his attempt to arouse sympathy for this sinner in the reader. The gloomy atmosphere depicted in the first paragraph anticipates the “darkness” surrounding Puritan dogma, obsessed with punishing sin, showing no clemency towards the human being’s weakness. At the end of the novel, Hawthorne will “free” Hester Prynne and Pearl from their “sinful” burden, the rigidity which the Puritans had created in their lives.

While Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* questions the severe Puritan doctrines constraining individuals’ identity, Henry James’s *The American*, revolves around the contrast between devious Europe and “innocent” America. Nevertheless, some years later, coinciding with the First World War, that Victorian “trust” in the American innocence and “goodness” started to collapse. As Henry F. May contends in his *The End of the American Innocence* (1992), there is clearly an invisible line that divides those times of “innocence” and belief in America’s special mission in the world, and the contemporary period where there is a rejection of the past” (xxiv). May maintains that, by 1914, many Americans had changed their way of seeing the world; the 1918 post-war events created some kind of uncertainty about the past and also about the future, as Americans could not explain the horrors of the War. Indeed, as I will discuss in the following chapter (2.3), twentieth-century American literature, beginning with the well-known “Lost Generation” of expatriate writers, would mirror these social changes. Innocence, as David A. Hollinger advances in the introduction to *The End of the American Innocence*, is a “historical artifact, a product of its own time and place” (402). And innocence fell apart in the same way the old world order collapsed after the war. Thus, innocence, like the American Dream, is a myth that has constructed the American identity as well as America itself; as myths, when the sociocultural reality is not so positive, these ideas easily decline,

leaving behind a sense of failure (the failure of a Dream) in a society where innocence has been replaced, once more, by the “original sin.”

A “White” and “Masculine” Dream

As anticipated above, the concept of the “American Dream,” though phrased differently, was first intimated in the Declaration of Independence, signed in 1776. Six years after the Declaration, St-Jean de Crèvecoeur, the French writer who had become a farmer in New York state, wrote his well-known essay “What is an American,” where he gives us his seminal interpretation of the American Dream.⁴³ In Crèvecoeur’s version, immigrants also took part in the American Dream, by working, saving and ultimately prospering. Writing as he does in the late eighteenth century, Crèvecoeur describes Americans as a “mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, German and Swedes” (51). Nevertheless, though in Crèvecoeur’s thought there was a primal idea of America as a “melting-pot,”⁴⁴ as several critics have claimed, the omission of other significant immigrant and non-immigrant groups, curiously non-white or non-European, derives from the selective nature of the American Dream from its early stages. The discriminatory policies that the new “dreamers” faced materialized in the obstacles and restrictive quotas that those immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America have faced throughout the history of migration to America,

43 According to Jillson, though the term American Dream does not appear until the twentieth century, Crèvecoeur perfectly described the essence of the “dream,” understood as the opportunity America offered to immigrants to work, earn a living and own a land, a dream that would be impossible in Europe or elsewhere in the world at that time (56).

44 In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors affirms that although the term “melting pot” occurs first in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) by Crèvecoeur, his notion of the melting pot is “somewhat incomplete,” as Crèvecoeur did not use the word “pot” (75). It would be the Jewish dramatist Israel Zangwill who “settled on the title [sic]” of his work *The Melting Pot* (1909) (Sollors 66) and the formulation of the idea, when he states that America is “God’s Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming” (33).

at least until the new legislation was passed in 1965. Even then, as Roger Daniels contends in his article “United States Policy Towards Asian Immigrants,” the 1965 law helped but did not solve the problem that immigration’s exclusion laws had created in America. To some extent, the new law, according to Daniels, retained some of the barriers and restrictions that its predecessors had erected.⁴⁵

Obviously the egalitarian vision of the dream Crèvecoeur proclaimed was quite selective, a prelude to exclusion acts to come. The government policies at the time did not help in the promotion of freedom and prosperity. The Declaration of Independence itself, as Jillson argues, in its reference to “Indian savages,” suggests that Native Americans were deemed to be an obstacle to America’s prosperity and the Dream, thus confirming the Dream’s unequal character (81). The policies elaborated to avoid Native American involvement in social and political arenas dismantled the ideological core of the Dream from its very foundations. During the creation of the new nation and the Constitution of 1787, there were two visions in clear opposition, the liberal and agrarian one, led by Jefferson, and the commercial and competitive vision supported by Alexander Hamilton (Jillson 48). In a society where only the white men were considered to be the leaders and where Native Americans, African Americans, women, and the “physically and mentally deficient lacked the independence that flowed from male strength, reason, and judgment” (Jillson 49), the American Dream was not for every individual, contrary to what the Declaration of Independence had claimed.

At this point, it is necessary to offer a very brief overview of the “history” of the American “Dreamers.” The American Revolution symbolized the ultimate materialization of the idea of the American Dream, as the revolutionaries aimed to establish a new society

45 The LPC clause—which intended to restrict those immigrants who cannot support themselves—mental and physical health requirements along with moral and ideological test” (Daniels 82).

where the main pillars were “liberty, freedom, rights, republic, independence, and equality” (Caldwell 68). The Declaration of Independence advocated the “idealistic” conception of the Dream, whereas the Constitution advocated the materialistic side (Caldwell 70). By 1787, once America was independent from Britain, that materialistic side of the Dream reemerged. As Caldwell maintains in his *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream* (2006), the “Arcadian” Dream that Jefferson and his followers had promoted and supported, collapsed in the 1820s due to economic changes (76). Some years later, New England Transcendentalists, would renew their faith in the individual, stressing concepts such as self-reliance (Gurudev 7). With Abraham Lincoln, the American Dream became a Dream of upward mobility. The onset of the Civil War implied, for Lincoln, America’s “commitment” to the Dream of upward mobility. The post-war period marked a time where the past individualistic dreams disappeared in favor of the materialistic side of the American Dream. The “agricultural” America that Jefferson had dreamed of had turned into an industrial one. It was the era of Horatio Alger’s “rags to riches” Dream (Caldwell 78). In the 1930s, with the Great Depression, the term American Dream as it is conceived nowadays was coined, infusing positive expectations among a population that was undergoing terrible times in economic terms. During the decades after the Second World War, America seemed to be living a “golden age” and the Dream was revived once more. However, the baby boom generation just encouraged and promoted the materialistic side of the American Dream, which shattered its idealistic core. In the 1960s John F. Kennedy once more nurtured the idealistic belief in a better America, and he thus briefly became a new kind of politician for the new generations’ hopes. Unfortunately, his assassination would symbolize the end of that idealism in favor of a new era of cynicism that, according to Caldwell, has constructed a materialistic American Dream where there is no space for ideals (109).

To sum up, the common feature in all these several interpretations of the American Dream, from Crèvecoeur to the present day, is that any human being can succeed in America, if he or she works hard enough.⁴⁶

During the 1960s and the 1970s, new alternative approaches to literature appeared which focused on gender, class and race, necessarily revising the myth of the American Adam as well as the American Dream and the ideal of innocence. The essential notions that the Dream promoted lost their universal character as the Dream was increasingly shown not to work for every individual: women, Native Americans, African-Americans, and “other marginalized groups,” were originally excluded, as Pâtea contends in “The Myth of the American Adam” (39). Although gender issues will be discussed further in later chapters, we can briefly say that the American Dream has been gendered from the very outset. Werner Sollors contends that in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, gender symbolism is crucial, specifically in the paragraph where the author describes the “male” immigrant “being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater” (Crèvecoeur 55), a metaphor that interprets the land as a woman.⁴⁷

The presence of women at the beginning of the new nation has been omitted and relegated to a subordinate position in official histories. And yet, women have always been there, in America—sometimes in the form of an “unspoken” and “silenced” presence. In *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers 1630-1860*, Annette Kolodney claims that women, like their male counterparts, also dreamt “of transforming the

46 Once again, I am choosing the term “human being” instead of “man.” Crèvecoeur, Roosevelt and Jillson continue thinking of a “dream” made for and by men.

47 In later times, ecofeminism has tackled the notion of the land as “Mother Earth” from different perspectives Irene Diamond perceives the origin of the vision of the earth as feminine, as a “she,” in ancient “Goddess-revering societies or the earth-based spiritual practices of many indigenous peoples” (14). The notion of “Mother Earth” as utopian synonym for plentifulness, truth and other positive characteristics has also been the object of different interpretations. The connection between “Mother Earth” and “motherhood” is one of the slippery areas in ecofeminism, as “motherhood” has had positive but also negative connotations for women’s independence.

wilderness” in the colonization of the West (xii); however, both history and the very language used to describe the origins of America and the American Dream itself have reduced women to a mere footnote at most. Jefferson’s agrarian ideal, as much as the actual Declaration of Independence, referred to “Men” and “husbandmen,” American Adams that conquered a new Eden, where Eves seemed to be missing. Since this gendered construction is central to our discussion in this doctoral dissertations, we will come back to it in later chapters.

The American Dream and its “Nature”

Since the origins of the American Dream, “nature” has played a crucial role. As Marx claims, the notion of nature is as embedded in American ethics as the “ideas of freedom and equality” (30). The first settlers came to America in search of a free land where they could start a new life away from the restrictions and norms of the old world.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian ideal of America, turned this dream into an ideology.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the Puritans piloted the dreams of the first pioneers, trying to offer them the promise of “free” land—in terms of religion—the paradise where they could build a new life away from the old depraved world. As is well known, the idea of a natural paradise has its origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Garden of Eden. This is a place where “conflicting powers” exist, where a divine force and evil forces “contend for the soul of

48 The idea of America as a “virgin” land can be traced back to the eighteenth century and an intellectual tradition started with Crèvecoeur and Franklin and continued by Emerson, Lincoln and “hundred others,” as Marni Gauthier contends in “Better Living Through Westward Migration.” According to the idea of the “myth of the garden,” the American west was conceived as a “natural, regenerative, agrarian utopia” (276).

49 In *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming The American Dream* (2006), the current president of the United States, Barack Obama, denounces how the Jefferson’s agrarian ideal was sacrificed in the name of capitalism and social mobility (151).

man” (Sanford 26)⁵⁰. The positive element in this binary is “paralleled by the image of paradise” (Sanford 26). Consequently, the search for Paradise in America is the search for freedom, for a place to achieve happiness and fulfillment for the individual. The pastoral tradition was the literary framework where the idea of nature in communion with morality found an apt niche. Originally, during the stage of the “civilization” of the New World, Puritans regarded the “wilderness” as the opposite of the “paradise.” As Henry Nash maintains, it was then that the wilderness “acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol” (24). Later in the nineteenth century, Nash specifies, the wilderness would acquire the opposite implication, when it became a symbol of primal nature, in its purest state. The natural “wilderness,” Hans Bertens argues, can also be interpreted in a positive way, as the first pioneers did, as a place where one can find freedom, or else in negative terms, as a place of temptation (202).⁵¹ Anyhow, the relationship between human beings and nature has never been very equitable in Western cultures. Furthermore, the Biblical idea of “man” as the “master of creation,” relegating nature to a subordinated position did not help either.

There is another important element, in my opinion, that has been crucial in the genesis of the American Dream, the Frontier, which fostered the idea of America as an open range where the individual could achieve the promised “rebirth” into a new life. In fact, two historical moments—the opening and closing of the Frontier—have symbolized the complicated relation between pioneers and nature. As I discussed before, the closing of the frontier meant the beginning of a new era where the relationship between “man” and the land/nature was displaced and relegated to an almost insignificant position, and was superseded by a new relation between “man” and technology, symbolizing progress. In the late eighteenth

50 The Garden of Eden’s Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil represents the “growth of life itself” inside which “both good and evil were put by god Yahweh” (Conklin 109).

51 Later on, in the nineties, as Bertens contends, these hierarchical constructions operating in “nature,” such as “nature” and “wilderness” will be explored and analyzed by “ecocriticism” (201).

and early nineteenth centuries, the Romantics advocated the pastoral ideal of nature as a response to the Industrial Revolution. Curiously enough, there has always been some kind of natural and “pastoral” epistemology in the context of American literature before the American Romanticism. Early in the eighteenth century, with Crèvecoeur and especially Jefferson, nature has been “pastoralized.” In the case of Jefferson, the pastoral idea reflected in his writings aimed to establish a new kind of lifestyle in the agrarian America of that time. As Marx contends, the American Pastoral idea was already present in the first settlers long before the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, with its commitment to the natural world as an inherently good and positive entity in a clear opposition to the corrupted industrial society.

In recent times, there has been a return to nature in search of the veracity of the traditional and “‘natural’ hierarchy relationship” (Nash 389). Marx argues that the “ecological crisis” at the beginning of the 1960s saw the emergence of a new idea in the public discourse: the environment (30). In 1962 Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, which has been considered by many ecocritics as the founding text of “modern environmentalism” (Garrard 2). *Silent Spring* merges both pastoral and apocalyptic genres in a pioneering literary study of “Nature,” where Carson denounces the use of pesticides and the dangers involved in it, questioning the fatal consequences of humankind on nature (Garrard 3). George Hart and Scott Slovic argue that the onset of interest in the environment in the literary field was prompted by the increasing interest that some contemporary authors have shown in the complicated relation between humans and nature, and their attempts to explain the real place of the human being on this planet (7).

At this point, a quick overview of environmental criticism is necessary to understand the contemporary view of “nature.” Though environmental activism became noticeable

during the 1960s, it was in 1970, with the establishment of “Earth Day,” that environmentalism appeared as a visible social movement (Simal 2010). Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) could be considered as one of the earliest (proto-ecocritical) works on literature and environment, though until the 1990s ecocriticism would not be consolidated as a critical school. The publication of both Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) as well as Glotfelty and Fromm’s *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) can be regarded as the official proclamation of ecocriticism as a new field within literature studies, together with the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE), in 1992 and 1993, respectively. In the 1990s Ecocriticism emerges as a committed discourse where “nature” in all its forms and representations is scrutinized (Bertens 201). The political and social commitment of ecocriticism is crucial: more often than not, Garrard reminds us, ecocritics are normally associated with the idea of a “green moral and political agenda” (3). Therefore, from a literary point of view the ecocritic should also hold certain moral and political views. At the end of the century, according to Simal, critics started to reconsider the “borders” that traditional “nature writing” imply. Armbruster and Wallace maintain, as also does Buell, that ecocriticism needs to attend not only to texts where nature is obviously present, but also to texts where there are “built landscapes” or where the presence of natural landscapes is not so visible (4). In his recent *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell confirms the presence of the environmental discourse in “cross-disciplinary environmental studies programs” as a response to the student demand (5). Though the field of environmental studies is relatively young, the “idea of nature,” as Buell reminds us, is very old and rooted in society since the very beginnings of our existence (2).

The well-known academic debate between Buell and Marx represents and embodies the clash of two interpretations, two distinct visions of the nature-human relationship. While Marx, who intertwines his concept of “nature” with the tradition of the pastoral and the discourse of cultural politics, proclaims a nature-human “dichotomy,” Buell represents the opposite vision of “nature,” which he has named “ecocentric” or “biocentric”: an interpretation where nature and humans are close to each other and, I would add, “border-crossers,” in contrast with Marx’s more “anthropocentric” interpretation of nature. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell distinguishes two waves in environmental criticism. The “first wave,” when environmental criticism was concerned with traditional “nature writing”—more specifically, “nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction” (Buell 138)—was followed by a “second wave,” when environmental criticism reviewed the scope of environmental criticism, paying attention to environmental justice issues, that is “social criticism” which aimed to explore not only natural landscapes, but also, those urban and degraded ones (Bell 22). A third wave is currently emerging as Adamson and Slovic claim in their “Ethnicity and Ecocriticism,” that “explores all facets of human experience from an environmental point of view” (6-7). However, this third wave could encourage an anthropocentric view, where humanity is once more placed above nature. In the contentious circumstances that encompass this tense association between “nature” and “human beings,” Simal proposes the concept of “transnatural shift,” as a necessary challenge, because of the ever-widening range of ecocriticism. In this “transnatural challenge,” natural elements are constantly “interbreeding with categories other than natural” (“Junkyard” 8), in a human ecosystem that will help us to understand our relation to nature and the relation nature has with us.

The importance of nature in the literature of the American Dream, as well as in American literature in general, is unquestionable. As happens in any civilization, the natural environment always predates human appropriation of the land. However, what makes nature peculiar in the case of the United States is the religious and personal connection between the land and the pioneer. During those early colonizing times, nature was “alive,” playing the role of a promise, yet it also constituted a dark lure that was beyond the command of human beings. Another reason that explains the distinctive role of “nature” in the idea of America is the initial conception of this country as a “blank slate,” a “virgin” country without a past, with only a future full of expectations. America was an utopia for many European dreamers.

As summarized in the preceding paragraphs, there have been many perceptions of nature throughout human and literary history, where nature was seen as evil, darkness, the “other” in relation to humanity, a cultural construct mirroring society’s interest in the natural world, etc. However, in spite of the different connotations accruing to the term, nature has nurtured many dreams; it constituted the landscape and became the imaginary haven for the first pioneers and the millions of immigrants who dreamed of a better world, a place where a little bit of happiness can be grasped. And the American Dream still exists today. As Frederic Carpenter argues, though the Dream “is ‘American’ in a sense, it existed before America was discovered, indeed, it helped to discover America” (200). The American Dream is the dream that millions of immigrants from other countries all over the world, for over centuries, have been dreaming about: this new land and the most impelling reason that drove these peoples to America. Thus it could be said that the origin of America was a Dream, without it America would not exist as we understand it nowadays. As suggested at the beginning of the dissertation, Barack Obama, the current president of the United States, is perceived as incarnating the success of the American Dream today. Obama, with his distinctive

“ethnoracial” background, has become the president of a country where, a few years ago, it was unthinkable for an African American to be elected and play a decisive role in the main political arena. As I discussed before, this “obstacle,” the exclusion of non-white people from the dream, was intrinsically against the idea of the Dream itself. In his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), written when he was still a U.S. senator, Obama enthuses about the need to continue believing in the dreams that Lincoln and Martin Luther King dreamed, as many Americans who have come to this country to build up lives “for themselves and their children and grandchildren, brick by brick, rail by rail, calloused hand by calloused hand, to fill in the landscape of our collective dreams” (362). Implied in his narrative is the belief that the past of the African American people and the overcoming of their historical exclusion from dreaming should serve as an example for the people nowadays, living proof that people can (YES, WE CAN) achieve their American Dream, breaking down those barriers that the past erected against them. In this discourse, time, history and the people have given Obama the opportunity to prove the egalitarian nature of the American Dream. As such, Obama constitutes the most recent example of the “American Dream come true.” Controversial as it remains in terms both of his campaign promises and of his actual politics, Obama’s dream of becoming the president of the United States has become a reference for many “Others” who believe in what America and the American Dream still stand for: the idea of a society that provides equal opportunities for all. Indeed, Obama’s second inaugural speech in January 2013, proves again that the American Dream is still very much present when the current president of the United States evokes the “allegiance to an idea, articulated in a declaration

made more than two centuries ago.” The Dream is not “white” any more, everybody can participate in it⁵². This is the promise of the Dream that still captivates so many people.

52 The promise of the American Dream, that anyone can rise from rags to riches entails that class should not be an obstacle in a person’s achieving the Dream. Unfortunately, the gap between rich and poor in America is by no means narrow, which makes it difficult for many “dreamers” to attain their expectations. Nevertheless, there are many well-known examples of individuals who have really moved from a very low position in society to a higher one, becoming role models of the Dream. Obviously, these examples are relatively few in the immense mass of those who believe in the American Dream.

2.3. The American Dream in the American Literary Canon

Let me start with a brief explanation of my choice of the word “canon” in the title above. As Arnold Krupat explains in *The Voice in the Margin*, the American literary canon has been understood as a body of texts deemed universal and “perennial classics”; at the same time, the canon was also constituted by a body of texts “authorized” by the socially dominant class—namely, in American literature, the WASPs (22). Offering a study of the relationship between (white) America and Native America, Krupat contends that the closing of the Frontier anticipated the future debate between “Americanism and cultural pluralism” (105). The social and demographic changes the United States has undergone since the nineteenth century have compelled the canon to welcome the new American social and literary reality. Both the “Indian problem” and the “immigrant problem” prompted the emergence of alternative visions of social order in the 20th century (Krupat 105). Thus, the brief overview I intend to present of the American Dream in American literature has to start, unavoidably, with the traditional idea of literary canon, though a canon that ultimately has to recognize the existence of ethnic literature and of the *topos* of the American Dream in such ethnic discourse.

From the popular Gatsby in the 1920s to the contemporary Ralph Chang, the search for the American Dream has been explored by “ethnic” and “non-ethnic” writers alike. Nevertheless, as far as the dream itself is concerned, there were certainly other writers and poets before F. Scott Fitzgerald who dealt with the ideals that the American Dream embodies. A brief summary would seem appropriate at this point. In his recent *A History of American Literature* (2012), Richard Gray states that the evolution of American literature drew on the

necessity to construct a literary speech that suited and expressed the “plenitude” of the American reality that the first pioneers saw at that time (20). Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland have also identified the onset of the American literature at the moment when the first discoverers and the new land met (3). The New Eden the first settlers saw in America prompted a distinctive literature which aimed to convey the existence of a Promised Land. Benjamin Franklin already established the foundations of the American Dream when postulating his program and wish to become whoever he wanted to be. As Gray contends, Franklin early conceived the American Dream itself, as he absolutely believed in the chance the individual has in America to make a new life for him/herself (71). Indeed, the American Dream has been present in American literature from the very outset, when the Puritans attempted to address and express their “providential mission” in the New Eden. John Winthrop’s legendary sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630) compiled the Puritans’ “dreams” in America, a land where they aspired to erect a “citty [sic] upon a Hill” (Ruland and Bradbury 11), a “New Canaan,” the symbol of their longings for a better society. In fact, Bradbury and Ruland contend that the American Dream was a European invention, created even before the first explorers came to the new continent. During the early years of the nineteenth century, America soon went from an emerging, youthful country to a more “self-confident nation” (Gray 2012). In the course of these years where the Frontier was still “alive” and open, James Fennimore Cooper, consolidated the myth of the West. In *The Pioneers* (1793) Natty Bumppo epitomizes the myth of the America Adam, a new hero in search of his destiny. A few decades later, Ralph Waldo Emerson proposed a new kind of relationship between the individual and the universe, where the individual, the “American self,” as Gray contends, was extremely important in erecting a “true” and “pure” society. Emerson relied positively on the postulates of the Declaration of Independence, and he

dreamed of a new world where those ideas of freedom and democracy could exist. In *Nature* (1836), he recognized two different tendencies in his contemporaries, which he named the Party of Hope, who expected a better future, and the Party of Memory, anchored to the past and its failures. Emerson himself chose to place his trust in the future, promoting the main pillars of Transcendentalism. Hence, Emerson postulates the existence of a close bond between the individual and nature, as well as the inherent “goodness” embodied in both entities. His disciple Henry David Thoreau shared with Emerson the belief in the realization of the dream in the new world. However, as Gray succinctly puts it, Thoreau’s Transcendentalism was far more intense than Emerson’s own. Thoreau lived his life according to Transcendentalist principles, and the product of his experiences is *Walden* (1854), where the author relates his personal experience of living in nature, in the woods, as the introspective way to understand himself and society. As is well known, in contrast with Emerson and Thoreau’s positive vision, writers such as Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, also known as the “Dark Romantics,” were not so optimistic and did not celebrate the “dream.” Hawthorne tried to find the individual’s inner self, the “truth of the human heart” in his romances (Arac 135). Melville’s very plots suggested the failure of the dream, *Moby-Dick* being the most conspicuous example. Another Romantic, Edgar Allan Poe, in Frederic Carpenter’s words, “celebrated his private dream” (200) rather than the promises of a better collective future that Transcendentalists supported. In his pioneering Gothic “novella,” *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), Poe presents an “introspective” hero who keeps seeing evil in the world. Hence, whereas Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau created a positive version of the myth celebrating “Adam’s independence and infinite possibilities, qualities that almost make him a demiurge poised at the threshold of a new age” (Pâtea 27), in Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne, Adam’s fall is still “resounding” (28).

Nevertheless, all these writers were staunch supporters of and believers in the “individual’s individualism,” though from antagonistic perspectives and with antithetical intentions, an “individualism” that, according to Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), encourages individuals to reflect about themselves and isolate themselves from the rest of society. This and similar theories have all contributed to the well-known individualistic ethos embedded in American society.

At the end of the nineteenth century, with the closing of the unlimited frontier,⁵³ there was also a change in the writers of modern America. According to Carpenter, these new writers would entertain doubts about the dream, “because their experience [had] not justified its high hopes. In literature, realism [had] replaced romanticism, and naturalism the old idealism” (83). After the Civil War, Henry James rejected Hawthorne’s romanticism in favor of “realism,” as a reaction to the changes American society was undergoing; other writers, including William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, were doing the same. As Robert Shulman claims, realism appeared to be triggered by the necessity among these writers to question all the existing conventions, as well as the conventional itself: American writers such as William Dean Howells even disagreed with the general demand for a conventional love plot—ending in marriage—(161). At this point it is essential to mention the growing importance that readers, the market itself, were acquiring in the years following the Civil War. As Jonathan Arac specifies, literature in the United States “took shape” as the phenomenon of the “bestsellers” emerged (137). The considerable changes in society after the Civil War impelled writers to find new forms and techniques to represent the reality experienced in those years. As the market “grew,” some authors saw the necessity to “dismantle” the traditional novel.

53 Turner maintains that the closing of the American Frontier, which he dates to the year 1891, meant the disappearance of an “era . . . marked by the influence of the West as a form of society.” Consequently, the close of the Frontier changed those ideals that embodied the American Dream—“the ideal of individualism” and the “ideal of discovery” (306). There were no more free lands to occupy and start out a new life again.

After World War I, what Gertrude Stein called the “Lost Generation” of Americans attempted to tackle all those unquestionable truths, always from an inward-looking perspective. F. Scott Fitzgerald both celebrates and disintegrates the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In this novel, as has been often noted, the classic movement from East to West is reversed: Gatsby moves from the wilderness that the West epitomized towards the East, where everything historically “started” in the New World, and where the innocence embedded in the American Dream was first lost (Pâtea 36). In Ernest Hemingway, another member of that Lost Generation, innocence also encompasses images of death and violence in a non-Edenic world. Adam is no longer the quintessential innocent hero moved by good faith, but a villain who has taken advantage of the earliest inhabitants of the American garden. During the post-war period, Pâtea argues, the essence of innocence underwent a dramatic transformation into a “hardened, subversive, and irrational” state (37), with Adams that are no longer innocent but radicals and rebels against the rest of the world, displaced by the world’s socio-economic structures. In *Radical Innocence*, Ihab Hassan—whom Pâtea identifies as the last “apologist of innocence”—conceives post-war Adams as descendants of the “old plain Adam,” but in conflict with culture: the time of self-centered Adams had ended (*Radical Innocence* 7). The new post-war Adam is no longer a hero, but an anti-hero who does not integrate in the social/political system: “In fiction, the unnerving rubric ‘anti-hero’ refers to a ragged assembly of victims: the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal, the poor sod, the freak, the outsider, the scapegoat, the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause” (Hassan 21). Pâtea affirms that the new Adam is still innocent, since he consciously realizes the corruption existing in the world surrounding him, and he does not want to be involved in the sociopolitical structure (38). It is an innocence, Jonathan Mitchell claims, that was lost when the American Adam gained awareness of the situation. The new American Adam becomes aware of the decay of

reality, and at this moment, his innocence is lost. But he is a rebel who resists the way society is. Hassan contends that the new American Adam is merely a reflection of the reality.

With the advent of New Historicism, which dismantled that common ground and unitary vision existing in American culture, the American Adam would be questioned once more, and even attacked as a “fraud” (Pâtea 39). For New Historicists, the myth of the American Adam promotes a national identity that conceals power struggles and class conflict. Furthermore, the idea of the self-made man, as Pâtea contends, happens to be concomitant with ambition and power within the context of “American commercial operations” (39). In the light of this corrupted vision of the mythical Adam, Mitchell argues that the American Adam “actualizes” the American Dream; if the dream comes true, there will be a return to an early “idealized state of innocence” (11). Thus, in my opinion, there is still certain hope embedded in this statement, the same hope that has characterized the Dream and its dreamers since the moment the idea was first conceived.

In contemporary American literature, the Dream is still present; however, it is usually accompanied by a sense of failure and disappointment. In the 1950s, O’Neill, Jeffers, Wolfe or Saroyan have celebrated the American Dream, but, as Carpenter asserts, they have also suggested its weaknesses (194). This failure of the dream comes primarily from the individual background of the writer; it is very difficult to achieve a complete realization of one’s expectations and this tragic realization leads the writer to abandoning his/her trust in the American Dream. The post-war “Adamic personae are no longer heroes,” Pâtea maintains, but “anti-heroes” (38) who are still searching for a place to belong to. American literature turns into a reflection of the American reality. As Philip Roth claimed in *Reading Myself and the Others*, “[w]riting, contemporary writers try to understand, describe and “make credible” the American reality in their literary writings (120).

Carpenter claimed that 20th century American literature dealt with “tragedy as a condition of modern life” and considered happiness as being ““beyond tragedy”” (195). Thus, the optimism that the notion of the American dream entails would not fit into this “tragic view of life.” In a society where the idea of the American Dream is so deeply embedded, any failure of the dream turns into a tragedy. Between the 1960s and the 1990s, as Hume recounts, there were not too many enthusiasts of the American Dream within the “non-ethnic” writers; America and the Dream had failed them, as the novelists had not found the principles the Dream had promised them. In more recent fiction, the response to this disillusionment is translated into the appearance of some common themes: destructive/problematic children, unconventional marriages where love is absent, and, as Hume indicates, unsatisfactory jobs. These three motifs appear interwoven in the most recent narratives of the Dream: Ishmael Reed’s *Terrible Twos* (1982), where Reed compares the attitude of American people to that of a two-year-old, always “perplexed and complaining about things” (92); William Kennedy’s novel about survival, *Ironweed* (1983), which tells the gloomy story of Francis Phelan and his bad luck; and Bret Easton Ellis’s controversial *American Psycho* (1997), the story of a serial killer in New York, which provoked a range of criticism among women’s organizations for its cruelty in depicting torture to women.

In the light of these recent examples, the future of the American Dream in “non-ethnic” fiction is disheartened and pessimistic. As Hume suggests, the generation of writers between the 1960s and the 1990s can be referred as the “generation of the Lost Dream” (292), reminiscent of Stein’s “Lost Generation,” where aimlessness and disappointment were presented in literary form. Likewise, it can be argued that, just as World War I disturbed those writers—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, etc—in such a way that they lost their faith in society and in the world, the 9/11 attacks have pulled apart the lives

and hopes of many contemporary authors. Both generations share the feeling of being “lost,” since all they knew and expected, all their aspirations, have crumbled in a sea of false dreams. As Richard Gray reveals in his recent *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), the 9/11 acts of terror left American writers without words to express the horror that struck America; “nothing to say,” Gray tells us, has come to be a refrain repeated by writers over and over. Thus, what separates the Lost-Generation writers from those we can call the 9/11 generation is the latter’s silence and disorientation. On the one hand, post-9/11 narratives jettison the present and instead look for refuge in the sureties of the past. On the other hand, post-9/11 fiction, as we would expect, react to the crisis that the tragic events caused in a nation theretofore perceived as invincible and invulnerable: for these writers, America is no longer home. In addition, a significant number of contemporary novels written in the twenty-first century focus on the fear that the existence of humanity is coming to an end. Patrick O’Donnell explains that this end is rendered in different ways in such narratives: a future catastrophe, a “third world war, or the massive destruction of the ecosystem” (182). In this group of novels we find Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), where the writer conjures up the end of our civilization, or Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), inspired by the tragic events of 9/11 at the World Trade Center. O’Donnell identifies in these writers the shared “fantasy” of regarding history as something malleable that humans can alter and shape, a recurrent idea present in the “American cultural imaginary” from the very outset, in the form of the early myth of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century (166). The 9/11 events in these stories suggest, however, that such a catastrophe marks the line between imagination and the tragic reality. Richard Gray argues that Foer’s novel represents a process of “familiarization,” coming to terms with the past, the 9/11 “worst day,” which will mark the protagonist’s life. Gray maintains that *Extremely Loud*

and Incredibly Close could be an example of the initiation novel with some variants, where the protagonist grows up and even comes to accept certain events that have directed his life (53).⁵⁴

In a fictional world where there are no happy endings, and, consequently, no expectations of a better future, there are also many novels that Hume describes as “fiction of thought,” where the reader can share some ruminations about the future.⁵⁵ In contrast with the liberal individualism that has characterized traditional American thought, culture and society, more and more there is a visible “need” among contemporary writers to join a human network as a response to the catastrophic and gloomy vision of the future.⁵⁶ O’Donnell suggests that the catastrophic element present in recent novels entails that “history” itself is a “narrative of collectivities,” that is, a different kind of human groups, such as family, community and nation (171). Therefore, the writers’ task, as O’Donnell suggests, is imagining these narratives of collectivities, portraying the different relationships between them. Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001) relates the story of the members of a Midwestern family and Eastern Europe. Parallelism between the economic situation, the economic “correction” and the each member’s “adaptation” to their lives away from the Midwestern lifestyle are depicted in a novel that reflects the major concerns American people have about the future of their country. Josh Olson’s 2005 film adaptation of John Wagner and

⁵⁴ Conversely, Hume has likewise pointed out the existence of a group of authors of utopian and futuristic fiction, who focus on imagining better “realities” which can help people to live more happily (274). Examples of this futuristic fiction abounded in the late 20th century, e.g. Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), and his prequel *Ecotopia Emerging* (1981), both ecological utopias set in different periods of American history but where the failure of American democracy has transpired.

⁵⁵ At this point, when we are dealing with different types of “utopian fictions” it is necessary to remember Margaret Atwood’s notion of “speculative fiction” that, according to her, makes her narratives distinct from those books regarded as “science fiction” (513).

⁵⁶ Nevertheless, as Patrick O’Donnell asserts in *The American Novel Now* (2010), the idea of community and its boundaries are constantly “reimagined” in contemporary American literature, in an attempt to describe the heterogeneity of these groups as well as the conflict with the old paradigm of individualism and “sovereignty” (188).

Vince Locke's *History of Violence* (1997), exemplifies this type of narrative where the traditional idea of an American family falls apart, resulting in a story imbued with violence and uncertainty about the future. Hence, as O'Donnell asserts, what emerges from this recurrent thematic preoccupation is the importance of heterogeneous and diverse communities in recent fiction and reality. If the narrative discourse revolves around diverse communities or different "micro-societies," the traditional concept of the nation as a homogeneous, stable and inalterable entity comes to an end. As I will discuss in section 2.4, since the 1960s there has in fact been a movement in sociology from "macro" to "micro"-worlds/theories, as the best way to study our contemporary society. O'Donnell invokes Benedict Anderson's thesis in *Imagined Communities* (1983), which connects community with nation, conceiving nation as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (61). Communities, and therefore nations by extension, are not conceived of by Anderson as fixed entities any more, but as entities imagined by their members. Thus, as O'Donnell maintains, contemporary American novels portray new communities imagined by individuals whose identities and lives are in progress, an ongoing process that also affects communities and the idea of the American nation. After all, America is a nation that has been, since its first foundation, a country made by and for immigrants, though it has also closed its borders to the "Others" in order to protect its "sovereignty" on many occasions (O'Donnell 187).

In *American Dream, American Nightmare*, Hume claims that only among those "Others" can we find supporters of and believers in the Dream, paradoxically among those peoples who were excluded or forgotten in the initial conception of the American Dream:

African Americans and other “ethno-racial” minorities.⁵⁷ Immigrants leave their home countries for different reasons—social, economic, political—and they search for a favorable change in their position and in their lives. It is assumed, sometimes wrongly, that their situation in the host country, in this case in America, will always be better than the living conditions in their home countries. In such circumstances, the immigrants see the American Dream as the only way of salvation for them and their families.⁵⁸

Post-9/11 novels, by both ethnic and non-ethnic writers, represent the bitter aftertaste of a still biased Dream. In “The Worlding of the American Novel” (2009) Bruce Robbins declares, the “post-9/11 novel is . . . disoriented” (1096), as are the people who remained in those dark, blurry streets that tragic 9/11 morning depicted by Don DeLillo in *Falling Man* (2007). Robbins reexamines some novels published after the 9/11 events, concluding that the American novel after the events of the World Trade Center has become more “worldly” (1096). According to Robbins there are two tendencies in this “worlding” of the novel. On the one hand, paradoxically enough, the stories tend to be more “domestic,” where families retreat into the home, a home that stands for anywhere inside the American borders, as outside them the enemy is waiting. The world outside America is complicated and unclear, and the writer takes refuge “at home.” In this tendency to withdraw, there are also several novels which incorporate what Robbins names a “coming-to-America” narrative, where

57 The term “ethno-racial,” where race and ethnicity are conflated, becomes quite a controversial notion as Hollinger claims in *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. Hollinger holds that the ethno-racial pentagon—that is, the five different groups or “blocs” by which society is classified—is problematic as it conveys a racist way of organizing people.

58 Spain has also experienced the tragedy of the “European dream” that “boat” immigrants from Africa come searching for. For African people Europe is the “paradise” where, they think, they can have a better life. Unfortunately, the reality is quite different and, in most of the cases, their “blind” journeys to different European paradises have a tragic end. The present situation of the “European version of the dream,” in the case of boat immigrants from Africa, is that every day many people risk their lives for a dream, and those who finally reach their European Eden face loneliness, employment restrictions, and also “color barriers.” In Ana María Manzanás’s article “Contested Passages: Migrants and Borders in the Río Grande and the Mediterranean Sea,” the author compares the Strait and Atlantic journeys with the Río Grande’s one. Both versions of the promised land (America and Europe) repeat the same pattern: “[b]oth borders are heavily traversed” (810). Manzanás also argues about the ultimate significance of the “border crossing” as it is usually accompanied by the process of “reinforcing of boundaries,” arising physical barriers that keep nations impermeable (819).

America is portrayed as a pleasing destiny as opposed to the threats that the world outside represents. In Robbins's analysis, *Jasmine* would epitomize this tendency, since the protagonist leaves India and her past, expecting a better future in America. In this group of narratives, Robbins mentions *Middlesex* (2002) by Jeffrey Eugenides, a "hybrid" story about a hermaphrodite, Cal Stephanides. *Middlesex* is about the American Dream as well as the idea of "rebirth," present both in Cal's life and also in the American Dream itself. In *The Emperor's Children* (2006), Claire Messud intertwines different characters' lives, exposing their contradictions as they attempt to make something of their lives and themselves. The *New York Times's* review regarded *The Emperor's Children* as a novel about the "gap between the real and the perceived," where values such as liberalism and postmodernism collide in their characters' struggle to achieve their dreams. William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), which Veronica Holligan categorizes as a "realistic" as well as "science-fiction" novel, portrays September 11's events as the motif of a break with the past (452). Dave Eggers's *What is the What* (2006) tells the true story of Valentino, a Sudanese refugee who ends up living in Atlanta. Joseph O'Neill's post 9/11 novel *Netherland* (2008) centers around the tragic events of the World Trade Center and how a family needs to confront their future in the United States after such tragic events.

On the other hand, there are, as Robbins specifies, a symmetrically opposite group of novels which have dealt with worldliness from an "expatriate" perspective. Robbins calls this genre the "expatriate novel," where the characters leave America in quest of something better outside its frontiers, like Norman Rush's *Mating* (1991), an "exploration" of love in Africa, or Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover* (1992), where the romance is set in Naples. Although the "expatriate novels" Robbins refers to are pre-9/11, for this critic they represent another

perspective in the American novel that persistently refuses to consider America as the ultimate place for one's dreams.

The atmosphere of twenty-first-century American literature is disorienting, as Robbins claims, just as our reality and, to be more specific, the US reality is. The aftermath of 9/11 has changed the way America and its people consider this country. Nowadays, the menace of fanatic terrorism has won over the illusory calm and peaceful prosperity that America stood for. The Dream of something much better than what you already have, the hope for a better future, has changed course, resulting in a confused generation "lost in [the] rendition" of the American reality.

The American Dream in Ethnic Literature

In contrast with the literary mourning and disbelief in the Dream that we find in "non-ethnic" fiction, the recent literary production of "ethnic" writers is still motivated by the ethos of the American Dream, a dream that can also become a nightmare for some of the characters depicted in these ethnic narratives. It is not my intention, when I distinguish between ethnic and non-ethnic fiction, to relegate the non-ethnic writings to a secondary position in terms of American literature. As we have already seen, names like Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau or Hemingway have always been regarded as mainstream literature, as Paul Lauter remarks in *Canons and Contexts*, an assumption that could lead to establishing "other" writings as less important and dependent on the former (Lauter 48). My intention in making this distinction between ethnic and non-ethnic literature is to emphasize how the American Dream has worked and still works within those literatures that have not been considered canonical in American literature until fairly recently, and consequently, they have not been associated with

the traditional idea of the Dream. Furthermore, in this particular context I will try to “compare” rather than “isolate” ethnic and non-ethnic writings in order to see if there is really a difference in terms of the Dream or, on the contrary, both groups share a similar approach to the Dream in contemporary literature. At the same time, since my dissertation discusses the traditional “white and male” versions of the American Dream and how this early conception is “translated” and “revamped” in immigrant literature, I consider that the distinction between ethnic and non-ethnic is necessary in pragmatic terms. Invoking Simal’s preface to *Selves in Dialogue*, I would rather suggest a “trans-ethnic” reading of the American Dream, exploring their particularities and points in common: “Mixing rather than segregating” (Simal 13). In the chapters that follow, which are devoted to exploring the fictional works by four chosen “ethnic” writers, namely Bharati Mukherjee, Gish Jen, Maxine Hong Kingston and Jhumpa Lahiri, I will analyze the Dream in order to discern whether it still works, or fails to do so, for the (South) Asian communities in America portrayed in these texts, in other words, to ascertain if the Dream is still alive or it is merely a relic from the past.

In her seminal study of the American Dream Hume claims that “most ethnic literature concerns community” (279), and suggests that the dream can also be understood in collective terms, that is, as the immigrant community’s success. However, as I will discuss in the second part of this dissertation, this “collective” dream is not that evident in recent literary production by “ethnic” writers. The notion of success intrinsically associated with the American Dream has traditionally been interpreted in individualistic terms. The hypothesis of collective success that Hume supports would thus contradict the individualistic nature of the original American Dream. As discussed in previous sections, the Dream aimed to fulfill the individual expectations of each person, to be more accurate, of each “man” or “Adam.” In contrast, the idea of an ethnic “community” is probably the most relevant element in

immigrant literature, as the group becomes an undeniable social reference and, in many cases, it also constitutes the “micro-world” where the immigrants live in America. Such a “communal” aspect would then differ from nineteenth-century “Adamic literature,” as Herzogenrath maintains (65). It seems that in the literary beginnings of the American Dream, one can find just the hero, the individual alone against the world. However, the American post-war atmosphere changed that simple Adamic conception: the tragedy came to be inconsistent with the self-sufficient and innocent Adam. Thus, the new Adamic character was “no longer the self-begotten, self-subsistent, or self-reliant Self” (Pâtea 38). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, New Historicists also scrutinized and challenged the old benevolent myth of Adam, and, as a consequence, the American hero was not considered a hero any more. Indeed, the new Adam’s individualism was regarded as a self-interested stance. As Hume claims, in this contemporary literary period of negation of the dream, community becomes for writers the only way of fulfilling the dream.

Even though I follow Hume’s premises on the “ethnic” American Dream and the significance of its collective aspect, I maintain that the “ethnic” American Dream, even for new immigrants, is still an individualistic Dream. Therefore, there is not such a visible difference in how the Dream is conceived by immigrants and non-immigrants, at least in their narrative constructions. Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, Kingston’s *Brave and Moon Orchid*, Jen’s *Ralph* and Lahiri’s *Mrs. Sen and Aparna*, are just five examples of “ethnic” individualistic “Dreamers.” In the end, I venture to say that both immigrants and non-immigrants dream in quite the same way, though, I also recognize, following Hume, that community plays a more significant role in contemporary immigrant literature than in previous examples of the genre. As we will see later, immigrants live in their own micro-societies or communities, which exist side by side with, but separated from, “mainstream” America. Hence, in sharp contrast

with the individualism that has characterized American society and the dream itself, these new texts demonstrate that the notion of community and its underlying ethos of “working together so as to rise together” could mean the redemption of the now “rusty” dream.

In immigrant literature the American dream is understood as the prosperity of both the individual and the “ethnic” community. It might be useful at this point to consider the distinction of no less than two subgenres in immigrant literature. According to Simal, there are at least two types of immigrant narratives: “on the one hand, the ‘traditional immigrant literature,’ that is, literature dealing with immigration and written by immigrants; and, on the other hand, ‘immigration literature,’ that is, the literature dealing with immigrants, or with the phenomenon of immigration, which has not been written by the immigrants themselves” (152). However, as Simal also suggests, there can be some alternatives to this division between immigrant and immigration literature. Some of the authors I focus on in this dissertation are not immigrants themselves, though in most cases their parents were; hence, the circumstances of immigration have influenced these writers to some extent, in their lives as well as in their writings about immigrant characters. It is also undeniable that an author’s own life does not necessarily have to interfere with the meaning of her/his literary work. In terms of Asian American literary and cultural studies, critics are reconsidering the relations between fiction and self-representation, as Sohn, Lai and Goellnicht claim (7). In particular, they argue that, when theorizing Asian American fiction, the world outside the text can be a significant reference (9). However, to say that there is a close connection between the fictional work and the social context can lead us to think of the Asian American literary production as merely a mimetic representation. Should we apply a narrow, positivist attitude to literature, any immigrant writing would risk being read as a straightforward narrative of the author’s life. Yet, while it is important to avoid such oversimplification, I argue that we

should consider the author's immigrational circumstances, even if her/his production is not directly determined by such backgrounds.

Much in the same vein, we should not essentialize the apparently self-evident binary distinction "immigrant *versus* non immigrant writers," or exclusively recognize these two fixed categories. There are nuances within the fundamental dichotomy that prompt me to adapt Simal's original dichotomy. In the case of Lahiri's short stories, compiled in both *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, some texts feature "transnational" plots, different locations in and outside the US, and also characters that are not South Asian immigrants. Thus, I will venture to distinguish a third type of literature, some kind of "transnational immigration literature," in between immigrant and immigration subgenres, that could better encompass the narratives written by these four Asian American authors. The label "transnational immigration literature" would embrace both immigrant and immigration literature, written by immigrants as well as the subsequent immigrant generations, along with the aforementioned alternatives, thus recognizing the "transnational" character of the recent immigrant/immigration discourse.

The "vanishing" or permanence of the American dream remains a central issue in this contemporary "transnational immigration literature." After all, these narratives deal with immigrants, their experiences, hopes and illusions when they arrive in a new country, apparently full of opportunities. As far as immigrants migrate in order to improve their life conditions, it could be concluded that their aim is attaining social recognition and economic prosperity; that is, in Hume's words, these immigrants "hope to better their position" (9), which continues to be the main reason for their search of "some variation on the American dream" (9). The desire to belong in America is significantly present in the immigrant discourse, as these narratives portray the immigrant characters' reactions to a country that

offers them the national myth of equal opportunity for all, but, at the same time, precludes the newcomers from feeling fully integrated into so-called mainstream American life. Therefore, in the light of this previous overview of the American literary tradition, it is unquestionable that the American Dream is still present, “alive and kicking,” in American literature, though the attitudes attached to the Dream have changed. While non-immigrant writers are now rather skeptical about the Dream’s premises –they realize that America, their homeland, is not the country it set out to be–, immigrant writers still show some confidence in the equalitarian promises embedded in the myth. Perhaps, the main difference between how immigrant and non-immigrant writers approach the American Dream is that, in the case of the latter, the myth, once held to be true, collapses only after their characters face the American reality.

2.4. The American Dream: Ethnicity in the Land of Promises

Here while the film-songs still echo
in the corridors and restrooms, we can trust
in movie truths: sacrifice, success, love and luck,
the America that was supposed to be.

“Indian Movie, New Jersey,” Chitra B. Divakaruni (emphasis added)

The complex and perennial issue I explore in this doctoral thesis, the American Dream, problematically coexists with another concept that is equally intricate: ethnicity. As intimated in previous sections, the American Dream, the dream longed for by the first settlers and immigrants that came and are still coming to the “land of opportunities,” has not been neutral for many generations of non-European newcomers, but biased and discriminatory. As Divakaruni suggests in the poem above, America is not the place that it was supposed to be for immigrants, in this case, South Asian immigrants, and the main reason for this disappointment is the existence of one distinctive element that distinguishes one individual from another: their ethnicity. William Boelhower has already acknowledged the uneasy companionship of the American Dream and “ethnicity,” along with the fact that ethnicity emerges when the American Dream seems to fall apart (*Through a Glass* 17). In the following pages, I seek to offer a brief overview of the origin and history of ethnicity in the United States, which I deem necessary to understand my interpretation of the Asian American corpus I have chosen.

Etymology and Theories of Ethnicity

According to Eriksen, the first recorded usage of the term “ethnicity” goes back to 1953 and it has been attributed to the American sociologist David Reisman (Eriksen 28). This is also the earliest entry in the Oxford English Dictionary, where it is defined as an abstract noun that denotes “the fact or sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group” (OED). Though ethnicity is thus a relatively modern term, “ethnic” is much older, as Eriksen affirms (28), and derives from the Greek *ethnos*, which was used to “describe a large, undifferentiated groups of either animals or warriors” (Tonkin et al 19).⁵⁹ However, difficulties have arisen because of the etymology of the term “*ethnos*”/“*ethnie*,” as its translation into the English language does not exist, which makes the adjective and the abstract noun opaque and unanchored. Furthermore, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith claim that the problem with ethnicity has been the various and at times false assumptions about what ethnic groups are (15). One of the interpretations that Hutchinson and Smith present is Richard Schermerhorn’s. This scholar sees ethnic groups as part of mainstream society, but subordinated to it, and without any connections among them. Eriksen’s more recent theory establishes oppositional correlations between class and ethnicity-race-nation⁶⁰. It is safe to conclude that the concept of ethnicity is complex because of the multiple interpretations and nuances accruing to the term. As Vivian Ibrahim concisely explains, since Max Weber’s seminal work, there have been two major approaches to ethnicity in social

59 In *Ethnicity* (2003) Steve Fenton illustrates the definition of the Greek word *ethnos*, using as reference the Greek-English Lexicon (1897) written by Liddell and Scott: “[a] [n]umber of people living together, body of men; particular tribes; of animals, flocks; (after Homer) nation, people; (later) foreign, barbarous nation; non-Athenians, (biblical Greek) non-Jews, Gentiles, class of men, caste, tribe” (13-14).

60 Fenton also identifies the difficulties in creating an ethnic group-race-nation correlation. Fenton accepts that these three concepts share the idea of common ancestry, and yet, there are crucial differences among them (12-13).

theory: first, the “primordialists,” who regard the ethnic group as a historical long-established group, and, in contrast, the “instrumentalists,” who believe ethnic groups to be intrinsically related to the social, economic and political context where they are found, up to the point that belonging to a certain ethnic group depends on a “rational choice” (14). Weber, the main representative of the first category, considered that ethnic groups are based on their common descent, derived from similarities of “physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration” (35). On the other hand, Paul R. Brass alleges that each ethnic grouping acquires its distinctiveness because of sharing some features— language, territory, religion, etc.— that render the groups different from each other (85). More recently, David Hollinger has tried to break the boundaries that the multiculturalist approach had consolidated with its pluralist model, and, instead, he has put forward the idea of “postethnicity” as the most adequate option to define the ethnic phenomenon in contemporary America (5). Hollinger’s postethnicity conflates both the ancestry and the heritage embedded in the concept of ethnicity, and, I would add, what is beyond ethnicity, what transcends it, implied in the “posting” of ethnicity. As the author claims: “At issue is how much our appreciation for a doctrine or a work of art or an institution should be based on its perceived ethno-racial ancestry. From a postethnic perspective, the answer is, not much” (127). There are neither fixed identities nor solid ethnic groups, but, individuals’ “life-projects,” Hollinger claims, an idea which is more in accordance with the postethnic approach as it conveys and accounts for a more heterogeneous society (12).

And yet, generally speaking, we can say that there is a coincidence among most of these studies in the sense that they all understand ethnic groups as communities composed of individuals who share some aspects that differentiate them from the individuals belonging to another group. Echoing Anderson’s famous definition of nation as an entity or, in his own

words, a community, imagined by its members, Wilbur Zelinsky states that the ethnic group is an “imagined community too large for intimate contact among its members, persons who are perceived by themselves and/or others to share a unique set of cultural and historical commonalities” (44).

The terms “ethnicity” and “ethnic group” are usually undifferentiated. However, as Yang states, whereas ethnic group refers to a “social group based on ancestry, culture, or national origin,” ethnicity connotes “affiliation or identification with an ethnic group” (40). Zelinsky likewise interprets the ethnic identity of a group of people as “their subjective symbolic or emblematic use of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups” (2). Zelinsky’s interpretation is quite challenging, as the author claims that the members of a certain ethnic group are related to each merely by “choosing any aspect” of culture. Zelinsky’s interpretation corroborates in some ways what Fenton and Ali Rattansi endorse, that is, that ethnicity can be “used” for a political, social or religious purpose.

It is an undeniable fact that ethnicity appears to be a rather ungraspable concept. Part of the difficulties encountered in attempting to define the term arise when people and critics want to avoid the issue of “race” or else associate it with ethnicity. In *Postethnic America*, Hollinger maintains that the word “race” is still employed to classify and distinguish the several groups of people; as such, the term still echoes the victimization and unequal treatment some groups in society have undergone just because of some physical or biological features. Furthermore, he points out that the current “ethno-racial” paradigm used for classifying people —e.g. for census purposes— is equally built on the idea that there are different “races” or, in the old terminology, “colors” that tell individuals apart. Hollinger urges us to substitute the word “race” in order to avoid the “victimization” and racialization embedded in the grouping of peoples (8). Hollinger’s “postethnicity” would then be a

response to the “racist” view that the victimization paradigm conveys: the post-ethnic notion encourages “solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds” (3), breaking the solid barriers that used to separate identities.

Nowadays, when ideas of ethnicity and ethnic groupings or minorities are intrinsically associated with immigrants, Etienne Balibar has ventured that there is a new era of “neo-racism,” where the category of “immigrant” comes to replace the earlier idea of race (20). Balibar’s “neo-racism”—or “cultural racism,” as the author names it, since it relies not on biological distinctions but on equally simplistic socio-cultural formulations—is a new form of racism that consciously avoids and avowedly rejects biogenetic racism, but which incorporates the same stereotypes and prejudices as “culture.” Stephen Castles similarly contends that today there is still a “covert” racism in legal and political structures; this time, though, “[e]mphasis on cultural difference is [the] new ideology of legitimation for a covert racism without [the past] claims of biological superiority” (172)⁶¹. Balibar and Castles share the same vision of an “undercover” form of racism existing in society today. Nowadays, immigrants are the others, the visibly different individuals who must adapt to the new social/political contexts in a world which rejects racism and its abominable past but accepts “difference” in the framework of cultural traditions.⁶²

One more productive and controversial association remains to be explored, that of ethnicity and class. For Fenton, class and ethnicity are intricately and deeply interwoven, as there has been an “ethnicisation of the division of labour and class structure” (*Racism, Class*

⁶¹ Castles follows the work by Philomena Essed, who distinguishes between “overt” and “covert” racism. “Overt” racism is, according to Essed, an open demonstration of racism, whereas “covert” racism involves those “negative intentions [that] cannot be inferred from the acts themselves” (46), that is a racism that can be read “between lines.”

⁶² The next section, entitled “Race versus Ethnicity,” gives an overview of the history of “race” in the United States, because “racism” was and has been a stigma for a country which has always promised dreams of freedom and equality.

and Culture, 235), promoting the “hierarchization” of the labor market. Thus, the lowest-paid jobs are always the niche for racialized immigrants to the U.S. Therefore, as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, ethnicity is a controversial notion not only in itself, in terms of what it represents and stands for, but also because it engages in conflicting relationships with other equally problematic concepts such as class, race, nation, or even, in some specific cases, caste.⁶³

Ethnicity versus Race; the “Ethnic Revival”

As I already mentioned in the section above, a brief summary of the history of “race/racism” and its effects in the United States is relevant here. It remains imperative for us to “remember” this dark side of the American past: the history of America has tragically gone hand in hand with the chronicle of segregation and racism. Indeed, the most ignominious events in the American past are those tainted with racism. World events, as well as the crucial domestic affairs would force Americans to address and, at least theoretically, abolish the racist dynamics existing in the country for centuries.

The term “race” was initially used in the sixteenth century to denote a common “breeding” in persons “of the same family or bred from the same ancestors,” which was soon extrapolated to animals as well (Fenton 18). The emphasis on the terms “breeding” and being “bred” or “well-bred” underscores the idea of race as a way of typifying persons and even classifying their antecedents, as if they were animals and it was necessary to determine their “pedigree.” Later on, in the late eighteenth century, the term “race” would be used to classify

63 “Class” is specially controversial when applied to the Asian Indian community, where caste frequently intertwines with class. As Divya Vaid affirms, caste is still very present in modern India (25), prolonging a difficult and unfair stratification within the Indian community that is also maintained in the migrant workers.

and categorize human beings. Nevertheless, the worst chapter in the history of the term “race” happened during the Second World War, when the Nazi regime embraced “race science [sic]” as a “guide” in their genocidal politics (19).⁶⁴ After World War II, the use of the terms ethnicity and ethnic became more prevalent, because of the change in the perception of “race.”⁶⁵ Nazi racialism and its “scientific race thinking [sic]” came to an end in the 1950s with the publication of the UNESCO entry on “*The Race Concept*” which declared that there were neither superior nor “pure” races (Bayor 170).⁶⁶

“How many Asian Americans were there in 1950?”, starts an old joke. The answer: “Zero. The idea hadn’t been invented yet” (Spickard 586). This wry observation illustrates the situation of Asian immigrants in America before the idea of “Asian American” was conceived, when labels such as “Far East(ern)” and “Oriental” were used for an Asian American community stigmatized as the unassimilable “Other” in the United States. The decades after the Second World War precipitated a form of panethnicity among Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Americans. At the same time, the emerging assault on “orientalism” prepared the ground for the birth of “Asian America.”⁶⁷ In the second half of the 1960s, with the Civil Rights Movement, a new era was inaugurated, when a new discourse on minorities and “race” started to be shaped. As is well known, the Civil Rights Movement originally aimed to eradicate the racist Jim Crow laws against African Americans in the South, a social

64 Bayor explains that in the United States, racial science justified “the cultural difference and Anglo-Saxon superiority” as well as the “extreme economic exploitation and the second-class political status of peoples who had been marked as colored races [sic]” (97).

65 According to Fenton, there were five milestones which contributed to the “demise of ‘Race’” in Social Studies: Darwin’s ideas on evolution; Durkheim’s grounds against “race” being a “meaningful sociological category”; Franz Boas’s attack against racial determinism; the condemnation of the word “race,” spearheaded by Huxley and Haddon, and, finally, the UNESCO report of “The Race Concept.”

66 In *Race and Ethnicity in America*, Ronald Bayor mentions that, during the 1930s and 1940s, there was already a significant group of scientists that started to abandon and to reject the ideas of the Nazi racialist movement.

67 Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) which is considered to be the leading book in the “crusade” against the Orientalist tradition in European literature, examined the creation of a whole discourse, filled with “fantasies” about “the Orient,” with the sole intention of promoting European imperialism and colonialism.

movement which took the legal form of the Civil Right Acts of 1964 and 1965, and ultimately helped other minority groups to come out and fight for their rights in America.⁶⁸ As William Wei points out in *The Asian American Movement* (1993), it was not until the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement that minorities conspicuously and effectively stood up for their rights: African Americans claimed their fair place in the American society, which had always relegated them to an inferior position as “second-class citizens.” They demanded the same rights the “white” population had at that moment. Asian American activists joined and took up the cause of Civil Rights in an attempt to make America aware of its discriminatory policies and practices, a far cry from the archetypal image of America as a land of equality, freedom and democracy. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement, ethnic minorities wanted to reaffirm and “vindicate” their distinctive origins (3). In the ensuing “Ethnic Revival,” minorities demanded “visibility” in the mainstream American society, something they had never experienced before. As Matthew F. Jacobson claims, black nationalism and the incipient multiculturalism of the sixties aimed to construct a new language that could suit an identity no longer “simply” American (2). An “ethnic revival” or “ethnic fever,” according to Stephen Steinberg, emerged as a prevalent celebration of ethnic distinctiveness in a society which had been predominantly WASP. Asian Americans joined such ethnic revival, fighting for their distinctive place in society.

Before the 1960s, there existed what Yen Le Espiritu calls an “ethnic disidentification” (20) among the Asians in America. The different Asian communities did not want to be identified with the group(s) being targeted by the various exclusion laws, so as not to suffer the same negative restrictions. Consequently, the Asian communities were

68 In his article “Racial and Ethnic Relations in America, 1965-2000” Timothy Meagher points out that the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 led the way to “break[ing] forever state-enforced Jim Crow in the South, and made deliberate, transparent state racism forever impossible” (95).

independent of each other at the same time that they were outside mainstream American society. During the late 1960s and in the 1970s the Pan-Asian alliance proclaimed the importance of Asians in the United States (Sau-Ling C. Wong, "Chinese American Literature" 40). For Asian Americans, Pan-Asian movements helped to widen the boundaries in identification among the different collectives of peoples of different national origins (Le Espiritu 2). In 1968, Asian American Studies Programs were established at San Francisco College and at the University of California, Berkeley. Asian college students, together with students of Asian ancestry, adopted the term "Asian American," thereby rejecting the label "Oriental," which "conjure[d] up images of 'the sexy Susie Wong, the wily Charlie Chan, and the evil Fu Manchu'" (Weiss 234). As Kim remarked in her 1982 book, for more than a century, the Chinese had been the object of multiple negative parodies in America: "The power-hungry despot, the helpless heathen, the sensuous dragon lady, the comical loyal servant, and the pudgy, desexed detective who talks about Confucius are all part of the standard American image of Asia" (3). The highly influential *Aiiieeeee* anthology, a pan-Asian-American compilation of writings published in 1974, tried to amend or subvert the such stereotypical representations of Asians in literature and popular discourse.

Therefore, starting in the 1960s and 1970s, Asian Americans have actively fought against the emasculating and distorted images of Asians (and Asian Americans) strongly embedded in the American literary and social panorama. Frank Chin and the other editors of the *Aiiieeeee* anthology condemned the perpetuation of such harmful stereotypes even in the writings of other contemporary Asian American writers, among them Maxine Hong

Kingston.⁶⁹ Chin and Chan's article "Racist Love" explored such distorted images of Asian Americans in the narrative discourse: "White racism enforces white supremacy. White supremacy is a system of order and a way of perceiving reality. Its purpose is to keep whites on top and set them free" (65). Indeed, Chin, Chan and other cultural nationalists have embarked on what can be considered "authentic" Asian American literature —what E.D. Huntley describes as "radical, polemical" writings—and what is "inauthentic"—that is, "critically successful, popular, award-winning" (58). At the same time that this masculinist cultural-nationalism became visible, the feminist trend, inaugurated by Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, emerged in Asian American literature and criticism.

In 1980s and early 1990s —as Lim, John Blair Gamber, Stephen Hong Sohn and Gina Valentino contend in *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*—, Asian American scholars started to pay more attention to explorations of gender and ethnoracial identity in Asian American literature. Indeed, authors like Lim, Kim, and Ling, among others, are notorious for engaging in quite original strategies in the long-term debate about Asian American identity and the canon. The well-known controversy between Kingston and the "cultural nationalists"—such as Chin, Chan and other *Aiiieeeee* editors—has resulted in incessant discussion about the issue of "authenticity" in Asian American literature. Despite their conspicuous differences, both cultural nationalists and feminists coincide in their projects of "claiming America".

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, critics like Wong, Sohn, Lai, Goellnicht or Simal have theorized a third phase in Asian American studies, the "transnational or diasporic"

69 As is well known, Chin attacked Kingston's works, for her "fake" revision of traditional Chinese culture as well as the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Conversely, Chin applauded other writers such as Diana Chang and Sui Sin Far, who, for them, depicted the real Chinatown and its people as their way of fighting against those emasculating and false stereotypes of Asians in America. These writers showed a Chinatown where the prostitutes were the white women, and it was "Western civilization" that corrupted the Chinese women.

trend that started in the nineties and is still ongoing. This current stage reflects the demographic situation that new generations of Asian Americans are facing. Although, as Christopher Lee claims, Asian American studies cannot exclusively evoke and rest on the past, that is, the history of immigration and the racist response Asian immigrants encountered in America, it is necessary to acknowledge that the particular history of Asian migrations to America, as well as the heterogeneity existing within this group, make the critical approaches to Asian American studies equally multiple and diverse.

Both in the field of Asian American Studies –or the larger Ethnic Studies— and in socio-political discourse, the future of ethnicity is quite complex, as there are many “borders that shape” it (Lim et al.). Within the context of the Asian American literature, ethnicity structures identity and constitutes, as Rocío G. Davis claims in “Begin Here,” a “social marker” (171) that establishes invisible barriers circumscribing immigrants to their “ethnic” spaces.

The Color Bar(rier) in the “White Dream”

What does it mean to be a fully American citizen, then? As I have argued in the preceding sections, ethnicity has been a pivotal issue that has historically determined the natural “access” of some peoples to the American Dream. Whole communities have encountered a situation clearly at odds with the purported equality proclaimed by the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), in its historic statement that “all men are created equal” (3). Nevertheless, as both Takaki and Boelhower venture, the Founding Fathers’ original dream, the America they envisioned was a “white” and “homogeneous society” (Takaki, *A Different Mirror* 204). The origins of America were thus construed as

“Anglo-Saxon and Protestant” (Steinberg13). This initial assertion turned out to be problematic in that it erased Native Americans, who were literally the first inhabitants of the United States, but immigration would further complicate the picture.

Historically, the America of the Dream has been made possible by immigration. Thomas Muller and Thomas Espenshade distinguish four major waves in immigration to America: the first wave, from the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, when mostly northern Europeans arrived in the new country. The second wave took place at the end of the twentieth century, when immigrants of southern and eastern Europe came in great numbers, but also, for the first time, a relevant contingent of immigrants from non-European countries. In the third wave, triggered by the two World Wars, Asian and Mexican people entered the United States in even greater numbers than in the late nineteenth century. Finally, the fourth wave, from 1965 onwards, brought immigrants who hailed mostly from Latin America and Asia (Pedraza 2).

Therefore, in the second half of the nineteenth century, corresponding to the second stage described above, and right after the American occupation of California in 1848, America demanded Asian immigrants’ help to build the transcontinental railroad, as Takaki describes in *Strangers from a Different Shore* (192). The first Chinese and South Asian immigrants arrived in America pointing those decades. Their experience in the new land was not as easy as they thought it would be. Originally, as we have just seen, America was defined as a homogeneous society and, in terms of race, America was unquestionably perceived and imagined as white. In the light of this, Chinese and Asian Indians, together with people of African origin, “shared a common identity,” “they were all Calibans of

color” (Takaki 205).⁷⁰ There was a visible difference between European and non-European immigrants: their color. And this distinction was not neutral: it involved a certain hierarchy. The earlier arrivals, that is, the first groups of European immigrants, were “settlers” and they “referred to themselves as ‘emigrants’ rather than ‘immigrants’” (Steinberg 7),⁷¹ whereas, “non-English colonials were typically regarded as aliens who were obliged to adapt to English rule in terms of both politics and culture” (8). Hence, from the very beginning of the colonization of America, European immigrants established an important difference in perspective that kept them clearly apart from the other non-European immigrants; that is to say, they were settlers rather than aliens in America. This variance in perspective also means a distinction in the “status” of these first migrants, the earlier ones were inhabitants of this land whereas the later migrants were just visitors. According to John Chiung-huei Chang, from the outset American historians viewed Chinese as “sojourners” rather than settlers, as they anticipated that Chinese immigrants were not going to stay in America forever.⁷² Actually, the earlier Chinese immigrants had to stay in America as sojourners because of the exclusionary immigrant laws, combined with and fueled by the difficult relations between United States and China. According to Philip Q. Wang, the transition from sojourners to settlers began during the 1940s with World War II, when China’s image in America improved thanks to China’s contribution to the Allied victory (62). It was then that the Chinese anti-

70 “‘Brown’” flows between “the line that separates black from white” (xi), Richard Rodriguez states in *Brown: The Discovery of America* (2002). The color Brown is inevitably connected to Latin America in the United States as a reminiscence of the imperialist past which regarded the “non-white Other” as “savages or native, Caliban or Hispanic” (Soldatenko 387). Caliban is, following Soldatenko’s thesis, the image of the new world native, which is not so different from the one Shakespeare conceived (400).

71 In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the difference between the term “emigrant” and the term “immigrant” is explained as follows: “emigrant” is defined as a “person who leaves one’s own country to settle in another,” whereas “immigrant” is defined as “a person who comes as permanent resident to a country other than one’s native land.” It seems that the contrast lies in the perspective from which the migrant is considered, a difference that is reflected in the prefix of the terms. When the migrant is regarded from the perspective of the country of origin s(he) is called “e-migrant,” whereas the country of arrival calls them “im-migrants.”

72 Sue Fawn Chung specifies, in *In Pursuit of Gold* (2011), how the term “sojourner” was coined by the California Senator John Conness to refer to Chinese immigrants, as he considered them as temporary residents who intended to return home (xxii).

discriminatory laws were repealed. The post-1965 Chinese immigrants, as Wang identifies, tended to settle permanently in the United States. Thus, before 1965, Chinese immigrants were seen as “guests,” never “hosts” in America (Chang 20).

In his insightful appraisal of the situation, Radhakrishnan describes how the problem between European and non-European immigrants arises from the fact “the white hegemonic formation is so used to naturalizing and universalizing its own perspective as the mainstream that it cannot conceive of other ways of achieving common ground” (83). Whereas the non-white group initially makes an effort to reach the “common ground” established by the white group, Radhakrishnan adds, the white group attempts to keep the difference or “alterity” and make it more noticeable, contributing to the consolidation of the binary system. According to Lisa Lowe, the mainstay of American society, that is, a democratic society where all the individuals are allegedly equal, proves “inherently contradictory” (*Immigrants Acts* 272). The inconsistency of the American democratic ideal is due to the contradictions of a system that promulgates that all individuals are to be considered equal, whereas non-white immigrants—in our case, Asian immigrants—do not have the same rights as the “Euro-American” population. Furthermore, as I discussed previously, the “homogenization” of Asians would mean an elimination of their distinctive differences. Asian Americans, as Lowe contends, must tackle and resist such simplifying sameness (139).

Curtiss J. Rooks and Jon Panish claim that the main difference between Asian and European migrations is the visible “racial difference” (134). The “racial” appearance has been a perennial issue since the first non-European immigrants arrived in America.⁷³ Their physical features, coupled with their different cultural or social patterns, marked them as “non-standard” never comparable to European immigrants: “the conditions and prohibitions

⁷³ I deliberately use quotation marks with the adjective “racial” as it derives from “race,” a controversial concept, as discussed in previous sections.

faced by the Chinese and other Asians were vastly different from those of Europeans (not to mention the differences among the various Asian groups themselves). These conditions, and the racial difference of the Asians, relegated them, legally as well as socially, to an existence outside the mainstream” (Rooks and Panish 134). As I will discuss later in “Theories of Adaptation,” Alan Wald has cogently argued that, as consequence of the very history of Asian migrations to America, Asians and Asian Americans have been relegated to “internal colonies” in the United States (“Culture” 23). In fact, this “internal colonialism” is the consequence of many years of history when non-European cultures were almost wiped out. Thus, as Wald claims, the history of the “people of color” in America has been marked by a different pattern since they arrived in this country.

Sucheng Chan likewise maintains that the “color prejudice” has a long history in Western societies, where the non-white color has always been linked to negative perceptions (45).⁷⁴ Chan affirms that the color prejudice is translated into the aforementioned Exclusion Laws that affected only Asians. Meena Alexander likewise argues for the centrality of the “racialized” body for Asian immigrants: “The living body makes a place for us, marks out the limits of dwelling. It stands as the irreducible marker of identity” (*The Shock of Arrival* 157). Alexander conceives the body as a mark of identity that increases the “shock of arrival”: “there is always one’s own body, which is marked as Other in this country” (7). The body speaks for itself creating an invisible “frontier” that separates one individual from the rest, at least in the eyes of the host society.

⁷⁴ This also applies to many non-Western societies, such as those of South Asia. See Rao for an explanation of social hierarchies in India.

Constructing Borders: The old American Frontier and the new “Borderlands”

The existence of borders as previously mentioned, evokes another important component of the American Dream: the frontier. As is well-known, Frederic J. Turner claimed that the closing of the Frontier in 1891 meant the end of the availability of a free land. In fact, for many scholars, it is the occupation of free land that has determined the ethos and “shaped the outlines of the United States” (Sadowski-Smith 3). In addition, I would like to argue that the closing of the frontier in the late nineteenth century further accentuated the already existing borders between people: “The end of the frontier was a significant crossing in American history: our society was entering a modern era of even greater multiethnicity” (Takaki, *A Different Mirror* 227). It gradually dawned on Americans that they were not homogenous at all; on the contrary, they were heterogeneous. Furthermore, all of them had come to America through different passages: “conquest, slavery, and exploitation of foreign labor” (Steinberg 5).⁷⁵ In this context, the new “borders” came to represent the ways in which this diversity of peoples were separated. In early frontier times the cultures existing on both “shores” of America, that is, the colonized territories versus the wilderness or open range, were interpreted as completely antagonistic forces: the already known land was “civilization,” whereas the unknown was considered to be a “savage” place (Takaki 226). Similarly, the concept of the “new frontier” would come to signify the separation between

75 According to Steinberg, the origin of ethnic pluralism can be explained in the three stages of the American history quoted above: “Conquest, first, in the case of native Americans . . . and second, in the case of Mexicans in the Southwest who were conquered and annexed by an expansionist nation. Slavery, in the case of the millions of Africans who were abducted from their homelands . . . Exploitation of foreign labor, in the case of the tens of millions of immigrants who were initially imported to populate the nation’s land mass, and later to provide cheap labor for industrial development” (5).

immigrant groups. Thus, as Krupat has cogently argued, the frontier is currently construed not only as the last physical point that human beings have reached, but also as a “shifting space in which two cultures encounter one another” (5). This shifting, permeable space brings us back to Anzaldúa’s notion of borderlands, “a place where a new kind of self was being created” (*Borderlands* iv), that is, a place in constant flux and (re)creation. The concept of “Borderland” could be related, I argue, to the idea of “Third Space” put forward by Homi K. Bhabha. In her article “‘The Cariboo Cafe’ as a Border Text: The Holographic Model” (2002), Simal has already underscored this parallelism; there, she explores the manner in which Viramontes manages to create a figurative borderline akin to Bhabha’s Third Space, where the displaced person, the immigrant and refugee, lives (82). In this context, Bhabha’s Third Space would refer to a space in-between, in between “mainstream” American society and one’s own immigrant family/community. This “Third Space” “challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 208). The “Third Space” has no limits, it is fluid like the “Borderlands” and, like this concept, Bhabha’s notion always signifies a crossing of cultures.

Benito and Manzanás also explore the concept of “Border(lands)” and border writing in cultural and literary manifestations—more specifically in the whole body of “literatures” that contribute to create American literary discourse. Following Anzaldúa’s theory, they claim that “borders and lines (physical or narrative), like national anthems, give countries and our own selves the limits we live by” (1). However, such interpretation of borders seems to undermine and run contrary to the notion of “transition” that both Anzaldúa and Bhabha suggest in their theoretical discourse, since neither the “Third Space” nor the “Borderlands”

have any clear physical limits. On the contrary, different cultures coexist in those liminal spaces, and they do so amid continuous “crisscrossings.” Living in these micro-societies or micro-spaces parallel to mainstream American society forces the immigrants to construct their own society, their own reality: “What the immigrant must work with is what she must invent in order to live” (Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival* 1). These different interpretations of borderland(s), border(line), contact zones or Third Space are all connected, as they aim to explain the “imaginary” space where the immigrants live within mainstream American society. Ethnicity, again, appears as the main cause for the immigrants to construct spaces where they can live, apparently removed from the core of American society.

Borderlands and Micro-societies: Imagining the Space

As anticipated above, since immigrants are not often allowed to find their own “niche” in American society, they create an alternative space that is in contact with, but not mixed with, mainstream America. This “micro-society” within the American society bears a close resemblance to what Anzaldúa terms “Borderlands” and she defines as:

a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians or

Blacks. . . . The only “legitimate” inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. (25-26)

The “undetermined” place Anzaldúa conjures up is a place of “transition,” since it is a society in-between “American” society and the immigrant society itself⁷⁶.

In her influential *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary L. Pratt maintains that there are what she calls “contact zones,” spaces where people from different “disparate” cultures and origins come together, in “asymmetrical relations of dominations and subordination” (4). Pratt prefers the concept of “contact zones” to its usual synonym “colonial frontier,” since the latter is a term “grounded within a European expansionist perspective” (7). Takaki has also conjectured about the immigrant’s space in America, which he describes as an “ethnic island,” because, according to him, this space has everything the immigrant needs to live while he is isolated from “mainstream” society (231). In “‘A Wall of Barbed Lies,’” Simal explains that the “border(line) does not exist as a physical entity, but lingers in one’s unconscious as that which is neither one thing nor the other” (147). One element that comes out of the transitory nature of this space is the figure of the “border crosser,” “the cross-cultural bridge builder” (Anzaldúa, *Frontera vix*), who inhabits “a bilingual, bicultural, biconceptual reality” (Hicks xxv). Hicks argues that the “border crosser” is both “self” and “other.” Alicia Arrizón claims that “contradictions” are central to the “border crosser,” drawing attention to the impermanent and temporary character of “the complexity of identity and space, which plays an important role in the formation of community” (130). Hence, the “border crosser” and his/her innate changeable identity conform to an equally changeable and contradictory space.

⁷⁶ Even though the “Borderlands” theory was originally linked to Chican@ literature, there are more borders than the Mexico-U.S. border and more immigrant groups than Mexican Americans, of course. Since I am exploring and scrutinizing Asian American immigrant writings in America, I will apply this concept to Asian Americans.

After such a brief review of alternative concepts, I propose the term “micro-society” instead of Anzaldúa’s “borderland,” since, in my opinion, “micro-societies” represent those spaces where the immigrants live in a more precise way. The “micro-society” is “micro,” as it generally encompasses a small group of individuals if we compare it with the mainstream society, and yet, it is still a “society,” a group of members who share commonalities and who “socially” interact with each other. In micro-societies there is also a fluid movement of traditions, identities, and cultures. In my analysis, this concept will allow me to focus on social interactions rather than on the “borders,” which, though permeable, separate societies. As Clifford articulates in his article “Diasporas” (1994), where the author offers some ruminations about the “overlap” between the concepts of diaspora and border communities, borderlands “presuppose a territory defined by geopolitical line” (304). In my opinion, the term “micro-society” diverts the attention from the physical lines emphasized by the term borderland and focuses instead on the individuals/communities that inhabit those spaces. Nonetheless, my intention is not to debunk Anzaldúa’s border theory, but to complement it and propose another perspective for studying cultural and psychological borders. At the same time, my theoretical position is inspired by and indebted to Anzaldúan “Borderlands,” as the “micro-societies” I talk of represent spaces of continuous exchange where those who do not fit in the mainstream society attempt to live.

Furthermore, the idea of “micro-society” echoes the latest trend among social scientists, as they seek to explain and understand the world and the social relations between its inhabitants. The 1960s witnessed relevant changes in the way sociologists perceived and explained our social reality. Much like François Lyotard announced the death of great narratives, in George Ritzer maintains that the hegemony of “macrotheories” in Social Sciences came to an end in the sixties, whereas “microtheories” emerged as the answer to

comprehend “macrophenomena” (275). Thus, social structures started to be interpreted as “patterns of repetitive micro-interaction” (Collins 242). For Randall Collins, by exploring how micro-entities work and interact, the sociologist can get to know the social world, and understand “the larger and more long-term patterns when we see how they are composed of such micro-situations” (242). Collins thus emphasizes the need to understand how individuals interact in order to grasp this “humansize world” (242).

I will argue that in the same way that the sociologist’s study “goes micro” in order to understand the “macro” magnitude of our world, we must regard these spaces where different types of social groupings occur—namely “micro-societies,” multiple and distinct from each other—but which together make up the “macro-world,” in this case, America. These “micro-societies” are embedded within mainstream society, shaping it, creating new spaces where cultures are in transition, as happens in the “borderlands.”

Thus, we can conclude that there is one intangible “reality,” this vague liminal space, and then, several labels, theories and assumptions about this place. As with Anderson’s “imagined communities,” these “borderlands,” “contact zones,” or “micro-societies” are in fact imagined spaces that exist as a result of patterns of social interaction where individuals build a sense of group, and create, at the same time, one idea and entity, America.

Theories of Adaptation

The issue of the immigrant’s assimilation or “Americanization” into American mainstream society has been quite controversial. During the 1920s, the assimilationist paradigm, developed by Robert Park and other members of the Chicago Sociology School, attempted to explain, and argued for, the “Americanization” that immigrants had undergone

in the U.S. After several generations, according to the assimilationist model, the immigrants would lose their distinctive cultural traditions, customs, behavior, and language, adopting the culture, traditions, and language of the mainstream society. As soon became apparent, this assimilationist model of integration failed; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan tried to prove in their seminal *Beyond the Melting Pot* that different and separated groups are interested in coming together to achieve collective goals—what later would be known as the “ethnic-competition theory”—a perspective that is the polar opposite of the assimilationist model. Already in *The Uprooted* (1951), Oscar Handlin enthusiastically anticipated the widespread tendency to think that the immigrants could be “Americanized” just because they were in contact with the American environment (270).

However, during the 1960s and 1970s, there was an adverse reaction to assimilationist theories. The aforementioned book published by Glazer and Moynihan in 1963 constituted a pivotal element in dismantling the assimilationist paradigm. One of the flaws that many scholars saw in this paradigm was that assimilationists did not consider the fact that the mainstream society “into which the immigrant is destined to assimilate is not a static entity but rather a work in progress” (Zelinsky 128). The reaction against the assimilationist paradigm came with the polemical conception of the melting pot, (re)formulated by Zangwill in 1909 when he described America as “God’s Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming” (qtd. Takaki 267)⁷⁷. The goal of this assimilationist project was the “creation of a new race of man,” transforming the “old identities” into a new single one (257). The melting pot theory envisioned America as a big pot, and the several ethnic groups would constitute the “ingredients” (Yang 85).

77 Note Zangwill’s Eurocentrism.

In recent years, assimilationism and the cumbersome notion of the “melting-pot” has come under fire. It was seen as a threat to the original, “old” identities, since it presupposed a process of homogenization (Yang 86; Waters 4). As a response to assimilationist theories, there emerged a different paradigm, “ethnic pluralism,” which celebrated the existence of different ethnic groups and valued that very distinctiveness. Ethnic pluralists argued in favor of protecting such “ethnic difference” against the forces of assimilation. Although cultural pluralists encouraged the existence of ethnic diversity, all the diverse groups “would share an overriding loyalty to the nation and participate in its political and economic life” (Steinberg 253). Hollinger’s notion of cosmopolitanism went beyond cultural pluralism. As Hollinger contends in *Postethnic America*, pluralism differs from cosmopolitanism in the “degree to which it endows with privilege particular groups, especially the communities” (85): whereas pluralism revolves around communities and preexisting groups, cosmopolitanism focuses on the individuals and their multiple affiliations to different groups (Hollinger, *Cosmopolitanism* xix).

During the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to the Civil Rights Movement and the emphasis on ethnic distinctiveness, there was a socio-cultural crisis that led to the emergence of two different tendencies: on the one hand, the “Ethnicity School,” and, on the other hand, what Wald calls the “proponents of class, gender and race methodology.” The Ethnicity School recognizes just one path for people to become American: immigration and assimilation. It therefore ignores the history of slavery that affected millions of African Americans.⁷⁸ In this framework, the history of Native Americans, peoples from Africa and Latinos/as is likewise forgotten. Such a historical neglect led critics like Wald to propose the “class, gender and race

⁷⁸ In *The American Economy: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Cynthia Clark Northrup details that the number of African slaves imported into America was 650,000, though this number would rapidly grow into millions as the slave population became greater in America (460).

methodology,” which defends the existence of “internal colonialism” in America.⁷⁹ The “internal colonialism” model would thus account for the difference between the conditions that Asian immigrants and European immigrants had to undergo when entering America just because the former are perceived as “people of color.” In contrast, the Ethnicity School had just focused on the category of ethnicity, relegating the issue of race to a “mere feature of some ethnic groups” (Wald 23).

The weakness of the class, gender and race movement, according to Wald himself, is that this school tends to concentrate on African Americans to the detriment of other ethnic minorities. Wald explains that the class, gender and race critics consider African Americans as the group that has suffered the worst conditions in coming to and living in America. Undeniably, the terrible chronicles of the first African American “slaves” who “came” to America tell a different story from those of immigrants, a past that cannot be ignored by critics; however, it would not be fair to forget other immigrant groups, which have endured similar prejudices as well as legal and social exclusions⁸⁰. Hence, though we cannot forget slavery and its miseries, it would be pointless to omit the other ethnic groups. In all cases—African Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Americans, Latinos and Japanese Americans—bigoted attitudes were fostered by the differences in “color”:

Yet, the evidence is strong that, to people of color, in their writings as well as their lives, race, not ethnicity, is by far the more central category in American culture; and by race is not meant genuine biological features, but the social construction of racial

⁷⁹ The theory of “Internal Colonialism” was first developed by the sociologist Robert Blauner (1972), who argued that the Asian immigrant experience is extremely different from the European immigration in America because of the very history of the Asian migrations into America, a history marked by restrictions as well as the “colonial” and “semicolonial” conditions under which the Asian immigrants entered in America (57).

⁸⁰ Chan recounts how “Chinese, negroes, mulattoes or persons of mixed blood, descended from a Chinaman or negro,” even to the third generation, were not allowed to marry a “white” citizen (*Asian Americans* 60). Similar racial segregation was endured by Asian Indians.

types centering on a mythology of color, and the concomitant attempt to diminish, trivialize, displace and distort the culture of those groups subsumed by those mythological categories through the hegemony of a select patriarchal European aesthetic purporting to be objective. (Wald 28)

The “mythology of color” is a distinctive element that renders immigrant people of color different from the non-colored European immigrants and helps explain why only they have to undergo a series of difficult experiences and face certain obstacles that the latter have never experienced. Wald insists that “color” has represented a barrier for those “non-European immigrants” in their attempt to obtain economic advancement and social mobility; thus, the progress of people of color is never comparable to the progress of “white” people (Wald 24).⁸¹ Wald contends that this different treatment of people of color is due to a “general rise of Western Colonialism in which a deviation in pigmentation from the ‘norm’ of Western society was alleged to be a sign of inferiority” (24). Takaki likewise claims that the problem Asian immigrants faced when arriving in America was their “color”: they were not as “white” as the existing majority and their “color” was seen as a major obstacle to help build the young American society, a homogeneous white society.⁸²

In their attempt to live in the non-imaginary mainstream society, Asian immigrants had to face several social, “racial,” even linguistic barriers.. There was a time when Chinese immigrants were thought to have reached some degree of assimilation: they were regarded as the “model minority.” The myth came from the assumption that (South) Asian immigrants had been able to assimilate into American society in a more successful way than any other

81 I intentionally used the word “white” to make Wald’s statement more controversial in terms of “color,” echoing the difference Wald establishes between “people of color” and European immigrants.

82 Takaki quotes Robert E. Park when he uses the term “racial uniforms” to refer to the different color of the Asian immigrants (473).

immigrant minority group. As Kim argues, the “model minority” Asian was the “good” Asian who can be assimilated effortlessly into the American society (18). This assimilation entailed that the Asian immigrant voluntarily accepted and embraced the new culture, rejecting those racial and cultural aspects of themselves that could not be “adapted” to the American mainstream culture (18). The government used the Asian community as a positive role model for other minority groups to “look up to,” especially for African Americans: “If the failure of blacks on welfare warns Americans in general how they should not behave, the triumph of Asian Americans affirms the deeply rooted values of the Protestant ethic and self-reliance” (Takaki 416). Therefore, the two axioms in the WASP doctrine (“Protestant work ethic” and self-reliance) were what the white majority recognized in the Asian (American) minority and what apparently could help them to integrate in white America.⁸³ However, the real situation was rather different. Furthermore, the image of the model minority did not help Asian immigrants to feel welcome in America, it just turned them into “middlemen,” instrumental to the ethnoracial dynamics that the whites were building at the time.⁸⁴ Lowe points out that the concept of the “model minority” embodied by the Asian community, a myth that “constructs Asians as the most successfully assimilated minority group,” is nothing but a “contemporary version of this homogenization of Asians” (*Immigrant Acts* 68). Instead, Lowe defends the heterogenization of Asian Americans claiming their distinctive cultures and ethnic markers in concordance with a culture that is not stable and fixed, but changeable. Hence, if Asian American culture changes, so does American culture (68). I would argue that

83 Weber conceived the Protestant ethic as a group of “beliefs about the virtues of hard work and economic acquisition, the need for individual entrepreneurial initiative and the rewards of a just God (Norms and Inglehart 578). “Ascetic Protestantism” encouraged the duty to work in order to attain economic recompense (Norms and Inglehart 578)

84 Mukherjee’s short-story collection, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), is a more optimistic version of the “middleman,” as the seven stories celebrate how immigrants can adapt and survive in America, and also, how they can be successful in their new lives.

cultures and societies are different from each other but at the same time they coincide and overlap in many aspects, especially if we consider the permeability of cultural borders.

The Future of Ethnicity: Preserving and Nurturing “Distinctiveness”

In *The Ethnic Myth* (1981), Steinberg foresaw the future of ethnicity as “blurred” (48). On the one hand, Steinberg stated that there was an “ethnic dilemma” consisting in the erosion of the “authenticity” of the cultural symbols of the ethnic groups, as the old generations lost any contact with their home countries and the present culture there. As a consequence, Steinberg maintained that “ethnicity in American society has become culturally thin” (63). The American-born generations forget the cultural distinctiveness of their immigrant parents’ ethnic group, and they mingle with the rest of American society, the place where they were born and where they now have economic, occupational opportunities.⁸⁵ More recently, Fenton has defined “ethnicity” as the sum of both public and private identities which are combined according to ideas “of descent and culture.” At the same time, the contexts where ethnicities exist are manifold and this multiplicity affects ethnicity, reinforcing the intuition that the contexts of ethnicity are even more important than ethnicity itself (180). In *Ethnicity* (2003), Fenton maintains that the future of ethnicity is intertwined with nationalism and a modern form of “racism,” arguing that the institution of ethnic identities in a society goes beyond “difference.” In a word, the existence of diverse ethnic identities can be translated into “segregation,” “the power of one group over another,

85 Nevertheless, they still suffer “discrimination in the labor market” (Chan 167). Though entering the labor market can be easier for second and third generations of Chinese Americans nowadays, they still encounter a barrier when they try to gain promotion to higher positions (Zhou 50).

social and economic inequality, and the significance of ethnicity for citizenship and the functions of the state” (193). As we have seen, already in 1987, in his article “Theorizing Cultural Difference” (1987), Wald distinguished between the European immigrants and the “people of color,”⁸⁶ that is, non-European immigrants. In the case of the European immigrants there was a noticeable tendency towards assimilation, whereas in the case of the “people of color,” because of the historical experience of racism and exploitation, many continued to struggle for the preservation of their “cultural identity,” usually in the form of “dynamic nationalist movements” (Wald 26). In *Postethnic America*, Hollinger endorses a distinction of ethnic communities in terms of the degree of “victimization” they have suffered: Euro-Americans may have had “their share of suffering,” but nothing comparable to “racial” groups (37). However, Hollinger criticizes the 1970s’ “ethno-racial pentagon,” as well as the use of the pentagon by the proponents of multiculturalism in order to advocate cultural diversity.⁸⁷ Hollinger faults multiculturalism with the fact that this perspective fails to recognize the existence of “mixed-races” and categories not evinced by the pentagon paradigm. His own “postethnic” stance, he argues, also aims at fostering the appreciation of differences against “the conformist imperative for sameness” (107). The core of Hollinger’s postethnicity is based and relies on the assumption that “[b]oundaries are necessary,” (172), but boundaries which are fluid and allow the formation of new groups, identities and distinctiveness; boundaries which individuals need to determine and construct, as it is their responsibility to “draw what circles with whom, and around what” (172). Thus, up to a point,

86 The use of the expression “people of color” by Wald (1987), who had already employed it in his previous paper in 1981, when exploring the political dimension in Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony* (1978), is quite disturbing and “outdated.” Although Wald uses this expression to draw a “clear” line of difference between the European immigrants and the “non-white” immigrants, his choice of words is probably inappropriate.

87 The ethno-racial pentagon, as Hollinger maintains, was a paradigm created during the 1970s to divide the population into five blocs: “African American, Asian American, Euro-American, Indigenous, and Latino segments” (8).

Hollinger contemplates some kind of freedom in the individual's choice of his/her own identity.

Despite the accusations leveled against Hollinger's postethnic paradigm—his views of postnationalism, racism and his rejection of the past—,many critics have recognized the notable contribution of *Postethnic America* to “the debate of about American identity” (Lind 206). Sollors recommends Hollinger's work to those who embrace diversity and the fluidity of boundaries (*The American Historical Review* 571). Yet David Palumbo-Liu, in a recent essay about identity, questions Hollinger's premise that we can go beyond identity, arguing that it is necessary to “move beyond type to individuals whose identity formation is arrived at in democratic interaction,” and that such a “move is necessary before we can go beyond ethnicity and see our way clear to a postethnic coalition,” though he endorses this aim “heartily” (778). In *Selves in Dialogue* (2011), Simal proposes “transethnicity” as the term that more precisely represents the idea of some “crossing of the ‘color line(s)’” (9) embedded in the author's notion of ethnicity.⁸⁸ In the same way that Hollinger explained that the “post-” in the adjective intended to revise and redefine the earlier term, Simal argues that the use of the prefix “trans-” is the best way to reinforce the idea of a comparative and revisionist approach to “ethnos” (10).

When discussing the future of ethnicity, it is also necessary to consider the future itself and the technological advances that usually accompany the time ahead. Thus, in her 2011 article, Ibrahim foresees that the new technologies and the internet will function as a new “cyberspace” where ethnic groups can be nurtured. Already in 2000, Paul Gilroy

⁸⁸ Simal argues that the term “transethnic” solves the problems of the “post,” which Hollinger already explained. By “posting a term” it seems that the importance lies in forgetting that previous episode or period, when the actual meaning suggests the opposite, that is, “building upon it and critically refining its contributions” (Hollinger 5). Simal contends that there has recently been an increase in the use of transethnic perspective in the specific field of the American autobiography. Simal proposes a transethnic reading and studying of literatures as the way to move beyond the traditional binary of “dominant versus minority cultures” (9).

articulated the importance of the new technologies in *Against Race*, where he explained how the media influences ethnic identities and groups, even going so far as to evoke Nazi propaganda. The media is responsible for some transformation in ethnic groups, especially among African Americans. Hip-hop culture, with its memory of slavery embedded in the many symbols used by African American singers, connects communities in diaspora.⁸⁹ Thus, popular culture and the media nurture the sense of community and the connections between ethnic groupings in the contemporary context of our globalized and transnational world.

In general, we can say that “ethnicity” has existed for as long as the ethnic groups have been fighting for their civil rights and their distinctiveness in mainstream American society. However, whether their culture and traditions are “fresh” or just a residue of their culture of origin is an issue that does not preclude the persistent relevance of the construct of ethnicity. It is a fact that America has been built by immigrants hailing from different countries and cultural contexts and, as a consequence, we cannot speak of a unique and homogeneous American society. There is no such thing as a single “American culture”; instead, there is a compendium of a variety of ethnic cultures that aim to be distinctive from each other and from the mainstream of society. Therefore, ethnicity matters when the group that “carries” it and tries to preserve it struggles to keep its distinctiveness among the other social groups. Ethnicity matters as long as it is the very “seed” of America: America exists because of the distinct ethnic groups that shape its core and its peripheries.

⁸⁹ In “Sounds Authentic,” Gilroy affirms the importance that hip-hop music has had for the African American community and also assures that nowadays anyone in any country around the world sings hip-hop because this music embeds a particular conception of “freedom” that can only be explained in the context of African American history. The “globalization” of African American music, ergo culture, evinces the “uniqueness of this vernacular culture” (“Sounds Authentic” 119).

3. The American Dream Revisited: Kingston, Mukherjee, Jen and Lahiri

There is a significant desire to belong to the “American society” in immigrant literature. Issues of displacement or dislocation, belonging and denial, are recurrent topics found in immigrant narratives. In the stories studied here, several immigrant characters try to participate in what they perceive to be “real America,” but at the end of these stories there is an aftertaste of disappointment with the society immigrants live in.

In “My America,” R. K. Narayan maintains that the Indian immigrant in America is not interested in taking part in the host society; on the contrary, Indians maintain their traditions, their acquaintances are also Indian, and their quality of life is poor because of the monotony of their lives. However, Lahiri’s *The Namesake* or Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* contradict Narayan’s sweeping remark.⁹⁰ Narayan may have taken the question of belonging, as well as that of the immigrant’s adaptation, too far. In fact, the texts analyzed here show Narayan’s article to be wrong, in that we encounter (South) Asian immigrant characters who want to take part in mainstream American society, though at the end they all prefer to live in their “micro-societies” where they feel safe. Their failure to join American mainstream society derives in part from the existence of an invisible border named the “color bar.” Therefore, such failure is not to be attributed, at least solely, to the immigrants themselves, but to the

90 At this point it is necessary to note the difference between the “reality” Narayan contemplates when coming to America—as the writer describes in “My America”—and the “fictional” world created by these South Asian American writers. Once more we come face to face with the old debate about fiction *versus* reality. Since “art imitates reality,” as Aristotle contended, the writer can be inspired by the reality surrounding him/her. When I reject Narayan’s thesis, it is because I maintain that these women who are writing about immigration often use their own experiences as a source of inspiration. Sometimes the borders between fiction and reality are blurred.

interactions between the American social system and the new arrivals. Mukherjee's opinions about her "Indianness" illustrate the opposite perspective to that espoused by Narayan. In the introduction to *Darkness* (1985), Mukherjee explains that, for her, "Indianness is now a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world. Though the characters in these stories are, or were, "Indian," I see most of these as stories of broken identities and discarded languages, and the will to bond oneself to a new community against the ever-present fear of failure and betrayal" (3) -According to Mukherjee, the immigrant selves hope to embrace the new society, even if this process entails discarding their previous identity, that is, their "Indianness." Mukherjee claims that her "Indianness" does not depend on where she was born or on whether she belongs to a certain caste or religion, since all of that "has crumbled" (*Conversations* 102). She considers that for many people "being Indian" amounts to classifying a person according to the place where she/he was born. Mukherjee refuses "being Indian" in that way. The writer advocates the idea of "Indianness" as a metaphor, as the way to celebrate her personal "fluid" identity. In *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, when the writer is asked about her own sister's "Indianness," Mukherjee answers that there are many Indians whose Indian accent has become even stronger over the years and their observance of Indian traditions too. Mukherjee explains these attitudes as the way these people have to keep their roots, their particular identities (101). However, for Mukherjee being Indian is something other than eating Indian food and refusing to join American society. Sandra Ponzanesi claims that Mukherjee's "Indianness" expresses the author's intention of not assimilating, but transforming her identity in America (35). Indeed, this idea of transformation is the one we find in *Jasmine*. Mukherjee's controversial opinions about her "Indianness" have triggered some negative reactions among critics, as I will discuss in the following chapters. Such critical appraisals mistakenly presume that, if a writer is an Indian

immigrant, as is Mukherjee's case, her "Indianness" must prevail over any possible enthusiasm or celebration of a new, fluid, thus not fixed, identity in the new country. And yet, as Alexander proclaims, cross-cultural journeys entail the self-transformation of the immigrant, even if the "racialized" body remains the same, serving as a permanent "home" for the immigrant.

The way that Narayan's article endorses the indifference South Asian immigrants feel about joining American society and their preference for remaining in their communities can also be connected to the interpretation of the American Dream as a "collective" Dream in certain cases, as I intend to explore next.

3.1. Individual versus Collective Dreams

As I discussed in “The American Dream in Ethnic Literature,” a section in chapter 2.3., Hume maintains that after non-immigrant literature lost its faith in the American Dream, mainly during the period from the 1960s to the 1990s, immigrant narratives continued dreaming the dream. Yet, in their hands, it became a collective dream, in contrast with the individualistic nature of the old Jeffersonian American Dream. The same premises which had lured those first pioneers and immigrants have continued attracting peoples from different countries: the dream of upward mobility, social mobility, personal realization of the individual—the self-made “man” who decides to change his life at one point and, after a lot of individual work and effort, achieves a “rebirth” into a better life—still underlies the American Dream’s idea. I maintain that the immigrant version of the American Dream prolongs the Jeffersonian individualistic dream, though, at the same time, I agree with Hume that the presence of the immigrant ethnic community is highly relevant in ethnic fictional renderings of such dream. In the traditional “white” American Dream literature that communal element was absent, as it pertained to a deeply individualistic American tradition. In the works I am analyzing here, however, the dream conceived by these (South) Asian female characters is always first an individual dream, but at another level it identifies and merges with the aspirations of the whole immigrant community.

Therefore, the idea of community is a relevant and distinctive element in immigrant literature, in contrast with the paradigm of the individualistic society embedded in the traditional, read as “white,” American literature of the Dream. But what do we mean by “community” in the context of (South) Asian immigrants in the United States? As Yoonmee

Chang explicates in *Writing the Ghetto* (2010), Asian communities would be defined as those ethnic clusters, spatially delineated, that constitute the place of residence and work for many Asian immigrants in the United States (1). Over many decades, Chinatowns all over the country became the havens for Chinese American immigrants in America. In a country that has historically denied and rejected their presence, Chinese Americans erected Chinatowns as the only space where they could live. However, in recent years, the panorama has changed in the urban and suburban landscape of America. In *Ethnoburb, the New Ethnic Community in Urban America*, Wei Li puts forward a new term to explain the current reality of ethnic communities: “ethnoburbs are multiethnic communities in which one ethnic minority group has a significant concentration but does not necessarily constitute a majority” (1). As Li contends, since the 1960s, especially in the Los Angeles area, there has been an increase in the number of Chinese Americans who move out of Chinatowns, which had constituted their communal haven in former times. Nowadays, the pattern of Chinese American spatial distribution is dispersed, and, as Li claims, Chinese American can even be considered integrated in the mainstream in “socio-economic” terms (2). On the other hand, South Asian immigrants, who also underwent exclusion laws in America, did not establish communities similar to Asian Chinatowns, Japantowns, Koreatowns, Little Saigons, or Little Tokyos, probably because of their more reduced number and other characteristics of their migration, as outlined in chapter 2.1. As was the case with Chinese Americans, in the last decades South Asian immigrants have increased in number and many have settled in America, trying to find their “place” there. Yoonmee Chang discusses whether the label “ethnoburb” should be applied to South Asians (177). Chang contends that one difference between South Asian – specifically, Indian— and Chinese immigrants has been the financial stability and social status that the former have tended to come with. South Asian Americans who have migrated

to America in the last decades generally enjoy a better economic position, compared with the situation of many Chinese immigrants. And, as they bring wealth, they are more able to create wealth. From 1990 to 2000, Chang observes how the South Asian American population has doubled or even tripled in some places like Edison, New Jersey. These new “ethnoburbs” differ from the old Chinatowns in terms of “class inequity”; ethnoburbs have moved beyond that discrimination (183).

Before going any further, we should delimit the differences between “ethnic enclaves” and “ghettos,” such as Chinatowns. While both terms designate an “ethnic community,” the connotations embedded in each are completely different. On the one hand, a “ghetto” is defined as a space of “structurally imposed, racialized class inequity, of involuntary containment to racialized poverty and blight” (Y. Chang, 2). Two words distinguish the ghetto: “inequity” and “imposed.” On the other hand, an “ethnic enclave” indicates a “rosier picture of racial-spatial segregation,” which, in the particular case of Asian Americans, “foregrounds a sense of cultural community” and implies “voluntary, culturally chosen segregation” (Y. Chang 2). By choosing “ethnic enclave” instead of “ghetto,” we are removing past racial segregations and inequities and creating a new conception of a space as synonym of cultural community (Y. Chang 26). It is no wonder, then, that Asian Americans have increasingly avoided the designation “ghetto” in their attempt to escape from their past in America.

And yet, if we consider Le Espiritu’s idea of societies as being organized around “sets of mutually exclusive binaries: white or black, man or woman, professional or laborer, citizen or alien,” or rich or poor, among other dualisms (123), we go back to the inequitable position immigrants have in mainstream society. Authors like Min Zhou continue to remind us of the

existing inequalities in the present labor market for Asian American immigrants, especially when they aim to occupy executive positions.

In the light of this sociological analysis of the “ethnic” communities in the American landscape, we could qualify Hume’s interpretation of the immigrant American Dream as “collective.” As she explains, during recent decades there has been a reaction against the individualism of American society in the non-ethnic narratives of the Dream: “The American dream had promised an expansive future,” but future prospects are not clear in a society where there are “no children, no joy in work, no sense of success, and no loving relationships” (288). Undoubtedly, the role of community in the immigrant literature of the American Dream is significant because of the history of immigration itself. Although immigrants also look for their individual dreams, the ethnic community continues to play an important role in the immigrant’s fulfillment of the dream.

The opposition of community versus individual subject in immigrant narratives is the opposition between the (South) Asian Americans and the mainstream “white” American society. This is especially conspicuous in Chinese American fiction and autobiography, where the presence of “Chinatowns” reinforces the idea of community, as we shall discuss next. Similarly, South Asian American narratives also feature clashes between mainstream society and the ethnic community. In the South Asian American fiction analyzed later, there is a quest for some kind of grouping or community that can mitigate the loneliness that the immigrant characters feel in America. The immigrant looks for his/her individual Dream, but she/he needs a community to share it with.

Chinese Americans: “In their Own Society”

They ate, slept, *breathed* Chinese, these expatriates, and they watched Chinese movies, shopped Chinese supermarkets, got laid in Chinese rub joints.

Chinatown Beat, Henry Chang

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all over the country Chinatowns became “ethnic islands,” in Takaki’s phrase, where the newly arrived Chinese immigrants could live and find a job, and speak a common language. These Chinese communities have been fictionalized in a wide range of Asian American narratives. In *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), Louis Chu depicts New York Chinatown after World War II and gives readers a detailed account of the daily life of a member of this community, Ben Loy. At one point in the novel, the narrator describes Chinatown as “a closely knit community where everybody knows almost everybody else. If somebody does not know you, there are others who do; though you may have no idea what a celebrity you are in your own community” (113). The image that Chu portrays of this New York Chinatown in his book still echoes the old legends about those first Chinatowns, dark and “mysterious” sites where prostitution and crime were quotidian. Chan Kwok-bun affirms that the term Chinatown evokes stereotypical and demeaning images “underlined by a strange blend of curiosity and paranoia” (32). Chinatowns have represented the unknown, “exotic” places that remain “inscrutable,” according to Pin-chia Feng, and different from the “white” mainstream society (39). In light of Feng’s image of Chinatown, it is necessary to discuss what Jeffrey F. L. Partridge has postulated as the “Literary Chinatown” phenomenon. By “Literary Chinatown” Partridge refers to all those narratives,

both fiction and non-fiction, written by (non-) ethnic writers who perpetuate what Frank Chin and the other *Aiiieeeee* editors condemned in the seventies as an incorrect and stereotypical portrayal of Chinese masculinities and “exotic” Chinatowns. As Partridge claims, there are still, at the turn of the twenty-first century, examples of “literary Chinatowns,” where the writer proposes a journey into an “unknown world.”

Despite the negative criticisms Kingston received from those who saw *The Woman Warrior* as a “fake” novel portraying stereotypical images of Chinese males and traditional culture, the Chinatown episodes depicted in *The Woman Warrior*, as well as those in Jen’s *Typical American* and “In the American Society,” do not nurture that exotic image of the “foreignness” of the Chinese. In my opinion, these Chinatowns represent ethnic niches isolated from the rest of the mainstream society where Asian American immigrants live and develop their “selves” in America. In the large “American urban landscape,” to borrow a phrase from Michael S. Laguerre in *The Global Ethnopolis* (2000), Chinatowns are those safe spaces, “islands,” or “micro-societies,” existing in the margins of the American “macro-society.”

In *The Woman Warrior*, Chinatown takes on the role of “home” for the young narrator: “we could also roam as far as we could go—downtown, Chinatown stores, home” (168). This feeling of “home” which encompasses Chinatown is rendered in the fourth section, “At the Western Palace,” where both sisters, Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid, meet in America. The earliest reference to Chinatown in this chapter comes when the sisters go to the laundry on their way to Chinatown. The third-person narrator depicts this moment as a return to China, their homeland: “they could hear children’s voices singing . . . ‘I am a Person of the Middle Nation’ . . . a literate man was chanting the Gold Mountain News. . . . The listening crowd looked at the pictures and said, ‘Aiaa’” (136). The passage itself symbolizes the

presence of “China” in America. In this quotation, the cheerful moment both sisters are experiencing is represented in the vocabulary related to music and voices, words spoken in the mother tongue, Chinese. It is a cheerful scene that takes these old two women back to their childhood, to their origins. Nevertheless, for the puzzled Moon Orchid, this vision represents America, and even the Chinese people who are gathering to listen to the news are perceived as “real” Americans. Leaving aside Moon Orchid’s skewed perception, in this episode Chinatown metonymically refers to and signifies China. Everywhere decorated with the colors of the Chinese flag, Chinatown is also full of young children singing and proclaiming their “Chineseness.” Emerging Chinese voices merge within this passage, which represents the first step for Moon Orchid in America.

The second portrait of Chinatown in “At the Western Palace” occurs when both sisters go back to Chinatown to eat something. The narrator portrays a Chinatown store full of women, where the owner is described as a “large” woman, wearing a “butcher’s apron” and smoking cigarettes while watching the female customers eating and playing games (138). This description does not conform to stereotypes of dainty femininity and suggests that this large woman knows how to rule the place. The masculine element is absent, there is no mention of any “Chinese American Adam” in this passage. All of the characters here are “Eves” who urge Moon Orchid to come to grips with her husband. These women are “brave” and demand Moon Orchid to be “brave” in order not so much to recover her husband as to punish him: “Have him arrested” or “You’ve got to do some husband beating” (138). Moon Orchid is portrayed as fragile and alone in her conciliatory thoughts toward her adulterous husband. The narrator’s description of the store gives the reader a gloomy impression by the somber imagery used to stress the “coldness” of this place: “gray building,” “fans turning coolly,” “cement floor cool underfoot” (138). Even the food depicted here is jelly-like and

cold: “[women] were eating black seaweed gelatin” (138). The whole description is marked by the suspicious “blackness” of the food they are eating, in a place where the sunlight is significantly “slitted” by the venetian blinds (139). The coolness of the place anticipates the brisk welcoming Moon Orchid will receive from her husband. As these women in Chinatown predict, innocence is already lost; Moon Orchid will have to be a “warrior” and confront her unfaithful husband.

After this passage, the narrator shows more of Chinatown, since the sisters go on strolling around the streets of the Chinese quarter. Now “rows of men” are depicted smoking in the streets, greeting the sisters. After a paragraph devoted to women, this one is populated by men. In this “men paragraph,” surprisingly enough, the imagery is “warmer” compared with the previous lines devoted to women. However, men are not portrayed as very “active”: “Business was carried out at the end of the shop,” in contrast with the women’s storefront (139). Women seem to be busy, moving, always active, whereas men sit quietly waiting.

In *Identidad étnica y género en la narrativa de escritoras chinoamericanas*, Simal offers a deconstructive perspective of the social construct of gender, by dismantling those hierarchical archetypes of gender that are deeply essentialist, since they established a gender dichotomy where certain attributes were naturally and properly feminine, whereas the opposite features were masculine (139). In this dichotomy, men were connected with those traditionally positive characteristics, while women came to occupy the secondary and passive position of this binary opposition. In the specific passage analyzed above we can see how these gender constructions are inverted. A scene featuring Chinese women smoking and playing games in a gray atmosphere does not conform to the traditional depiction of women. Even the portrayal of the store-owner is distant from the docile attributes traditionally associated with the feminine category. On the other hand, men are portrayed as passive,

cordial, part of a more pleasant scene if we compare it with the coldness of the store. This reversal of attributes also dismantles those stereotypical images that cultural nationalists have condemned, which depicted Chinese women as China dolls, as the lotus blossom, or “Suzie Wong,” all of them submissive, passive, “sexually compliant and easy to seduce” (Fong et al. 644). Kingston, in Leslie Rabine’s words, “violates the law of opposition” (474) by playing with and producing unconventional gender differences.

Chinatown becomes a refuge for both sisters, a haven that Moon Orchid feels to be like “home,” and at the same time, Brave Orchid deems to be the “safest” place for Moon Orchid. After all, Chinatown is the only neighborhood where her newly arrived sister can wander on her own, because, there, people “understand” her. The sense of a united community intrinsically embedded in Chinatown is reflected once more when both sisters go to Chinatown to look for employment for Moon Orchid, because that is surely “[t]he easiest way to find a job” (127). Chinatown is an “ethnic enclave,” an “entrepreneurial community,” where Chinese Americans develop “patterns of trust and cooperation among themselves” (Butler and Kozmetsky 38). On their way to Chinatown, Brave Orchid and her sister stop at the family business, their laundry. The laundry has a crucial meaning in Kingston’s novel as it constitutes this family’s attainment of their dream. Kingston’s own father came to America to attain his dream and bought a laundry, the place where he and his wife spent their whole life working. As Maxine, the narrator, points out, sometimes the laundry “would become a cozy new home” for the family (138). Maxine recounts the hours that the family spent in the boiling-hot laundry, not only the parents, but the children, organized in afternoon and night shifts after their Chinese school (138). In a previous chapter in the book, “Shaman,” the narrator asks her mother, now an elderly woman, if she wants to go back to China. Brave Orchid cannot go back; she realizes there is no place for them in

China any more. At some point Maxine's parents attained some of their dreams, as Brave Orchid recognizes. Now she is used to living in plentiful America, so that she has even "lost [her] cunning, having grown accustomed to food" (107). However, Maxine's parents have worked too much to get their dream, to send money to her relatives back home; they have given their lives to the laundry, a laundry which, as the narrator recounts, was eventually torn down in order to build a parking lot (48). Thus, their dreams and years of hard work came to an end due to an urban renewal project, halted by "American progress." The narrator's dream also seems to be suspended by the "stupid racists" she encounters in her jobs (49).

Therefore, the young Maxine tries to juggle her Chinese heritage with the present American reality she is living, an unfair reality where there is discrimination against the "others." The young protagonist will have work to do in order to "avenge her family," both in communist China and in an America full of ghosts who threaten her parents' jobs and lives. Kingston's narrative mode in *The Woman Warrior*, combining as it does realism with magical, fantastic elements, infuses this family's dreams with an important dose of hope. This is, for instance, the hope that Brave Orchid has in her ludicrous plans to claim and recover her sister's husband. Moon Orchid's husband, who has already started a new life away from the immigrant community, is probably the only character in this novel who attains his dream, albeit a materialistic one. The other characters just continue dreaming of fulfilling their hopes in a country that deprives them of their jobs (laundry), lives (Moon Orchid), and dreams.

In Jen's short story, "In the American Society," Ralph Chang is portrayed as "the head of the family," a family that is also composed of some Chinese employees. Ralph, the father, is portrayed as some type of Chinese "godfather" (minus the violent connotations of the term), beyond the reach of American laws. In fact, Ralph invokes his grandfather back in China, depicting him as the king of the village. At the same time, Jen ironically portrays

Ralph as the American Adam who has been able to achieve economic success notably fast, as the narrator, his daughter Callie, tells us: “we got rich right away. At two months, were breaking even, and at four, those same hotcakes . . . were supporting our family with ease” (114). Jen chooses a subtitle for the first part of the story, “His Own Society,” which endorses the idea that the Changs’ place in American society is their own micro-society. Ralph rules his pancake house as if it were his town (124). A certain “mafia” feeling is conveyed in the first section of the story, which describes the importance that Ralph’s own community has for recently arrived Chinese. Ralph helps other immigrants to come to America, regardless of the immigration laws. Callie recounts how he tries to bribe a clerk at the Immigration office in order to help his workers avoid jail. Portrayed as a self-confident man without fear of American laws, Ralph believes in his “own society.” However, in keeping with the prevalent tone in this story, the passage where Callie relates her father’s “bravery” is humorous and at the same time, sarcastically tragic, as we see heroic Ralph being eventually deserted by the workers he has saved. “His Own Society” conveys the idea that Ralph has of America. At the end of the story and in spite of the cruel “slap in the face” that his “boys” have given him, Ralph still sees America as his limited micro-society where he feels “safe,”

The women in the Chang family also participate in this economic success. As Callie tells the reader, her mother has left her job in the supermarket and now she is even interested in everyday affairs about “herself, and about America, and about what was what in general” (115). As the narrator-focalizer of the story, Callie uses a humorous, ironic tone, which evinces the typical teenager’s attitude towards parents. The generation gap is rather conspicuous. In the story it is Callie and Helen who play the role of “active forces” and impel Ralph to leave his own “micro-society” and join the American one. In view of their economic

success, the women of the Chang family consider this a necessary step in their burgeoning emergence: joining a country club, the “typical” activity that wealthy American families engage in. However, as her mother predicts, they have a “problem” when doing so, since Ralph at first is reluctant to embrace the new society: “Your father doesn’t believe in joining the American society . . . He wants to have his own society” (116).

Finally, Mona, Callie and Helen get the required letter of recommendation for joining the country club. Mrs. Lardner, a friend of theirs, writes the letter for them, as she sympathizes with the Chang women in terms of their shared “difference.” Mrs. Lardner has a Jewish heritage and she understands their peculiar situation. The image Jen employs is subtle but powerful: “I know just how it is. It’s a secret of course, but, you know, my natural father was Jewish. Can you see it? Just look at my skin” (119). Mrs. Lardner anticipates and unveils the main obstacle for this family in joining a “quintessential” American society: the racialized body, the “color bar.” Nevertheless, in spite of the crucial affirmation Mrs. Lardner offers, Jen enhances this moment with the same ironic tone that characterizes this short story: Mrs. Lardner compares herself with Helen and Mona and in doing so, she tries to share the same “obstacle” the Changs face because of their “less-than-white” skin. Ironically, Mrs. Lardner’s physical appearance cannot be compared with the Changs’ “bodies” where their “difference” is obvious. The Changs’ “racial masks,” echoing Takaki’s idea of “racial uniforms” in *Strangers from a Different Shore*, are self-evident and visible (13).⁹¹ The body represents a barrier for this family in their attempt to join a “white” club. In trying to make their “difference” a minor, almost inexistent issue, Mrs. Lardner is unconsciously doing the opposite, that is, she is stressing their dislocation, their lack of belonging in American society because of their physical appearance.

91 Takaki refers to the sociologist Robert E. Park’s well-known figure of the “racial uniform[s]” that constrained Asian Americans’ assimilation into the mainstream American society (13).

Erika T. Lin has also identified the paradoxical tone that makes Jen's narratives distinctive. As Lin asserts in her article "Mona on the Phone: The Performative Body and Racial Identity in *Mona in Promised Land*" (2003), the telos of Jen's humorous, even ironic moments points to more serious issues, such as "racialized understandings of the relationship between culture and body" (53). As might be expected, the weight of the role of the Changs' "own" Chinese community in this short story is significant, since it is the "space" to which the Changs' lives are circumscribed. Their attempt to "set foot" outside their "society" when joining the country club, results in an episode, simultaneously comical and pathetic, which I will explore in a later chapter.

In the sequel to this story, Jen's novel *Typical American*, the author continues the story of the Chang saga. The presence of the Chinese community is also relevant in the novel, especially when Ralph's connections with Grover and other Chinese families are described. However, Ralph, as the Chinese American Adam who seeks his fortune and dream in America, cannot live in Chinatown, since it would not be the "proper" habitat for a prosperous Adam. As discussed in previous chapters, both Crèvecoeur and Franklin, among others, envisioned the idea of a "new man," the "American Adam," as the individual who had the chance to abandon his past and "become" whoever he had dreamed of being. Ralph states his "interest" in the foundations of the Dream, especially Franklin's idea of "self-made man," as Kai Zhang asserts, who can give "himself to the country" (42). In the passage that describes the family's "culinary" excursion to Chinatown—which reveals that the family hardly ever goes there—when Ralph sees a store with "fresh-killed [sic]" meat (133), he "confesses" to Helen that he used to work in a place like that when he first arrived in America. He has risen, and, as the (Chinese) American Adam he has become, he can no longer live in Chinatown, an ethnic enclave where people just speak Chinese and do not

“prosper.” The image of the car—the whole family driving around New York city, just stopping by Chinatown—suggests the brief nature of the visit, as if the Changs do not want to be identified as “inhabitants” of Chinatown. Ralph needs to find a better place that suits his dreams. He drives faster, leaving Chinatown behind, and reaches Connecticut, a place which the Changs could finally see as their “hometown”: “It’s almost as beautiful as China,” Theresa exclaims (135). The Changs feel “at home” in their new abode, which embodies all their expectations in social terms. Unfortunately, the Changs are not allowed to live in “fancy” Connecticut, a traditional “WASP” state.⁹² Jen locates Ralph’s house and family in Washington Heights, a place where the Changs can see how their dreams finally come true.

South Asian Americans: The need for a “Collective Self”

Until recently, South Asian immigration to America, as anticipated, was not as significant in numerical terms as Chinese immigration. Furthermore, in the United States, South Asian American neighborhoods and ethnic communities have been less popular than Chinatowns. I would argue that South Asians were also discriminated against because of their “appearance,” contrary to what Samir Dayal maintains (238). As I already discussed in previous chapters, with the creation of Asiatic Barred Zone, in 1917, any doubt about the “color” of South Asians disappeared. The imaginary line that enclosed the Barred Zone automatically placed them in the same group as other Asians, whose physical appearance had labelled them as “Others.” And yet, as Kibria contends in her sociological account of South Asian Americans, the growth of South Asian business enclaves all over the country in recent

92 A state where, even now, the “white” population makes up 77.6% of the total, according to the 2010 Census. Given America’s history of mobility, this percentage is very significant, especially when we compare it with other states, especially California, with a white population of 57.6%.

decades proves the existence of a “network” strategy aimed at coping with the economic barriers these immigrants find in America (214). While Kibria’s discussion about communities/enclaves mainly focuses on economic data, it is my intention to discern the weight of the community in these South Asian narratives in what follows. I will try to explore whether or not the immigrant character feels the necessity of living in a community, and, if not, what the reasons are for her to opt for a life outside community.

“Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent,” two of Lahiri’s short stories included in *Interpreter of Maladies*, do not apparently reveal any type of community. In “Mrs. Sen’s” Lahiri portrays a South Asian couple living in Boston. Mrs. Sen is quite a lonely character without any adult companionship. “The Third and Final Continent” likewise narrates the story of a Bengali man and his wife, Mala. The only explicit acquaintance this South Asian man has in America is the 103-year-old American woman who rents his room. In “Hell-Heaven,” Lahiri’s short story from *Unaccustomed Earth*, the writer repeats the same formula of a South Asian couple living close to an American university campus, where the husband works/studies for his PhD and the wife, who has come to the States through a previously arranged marriage, devotes her days to staying “at home.” Nevertheless, in “Hell-Heaven,” Lahiri subverts the typical structure of her other stories by introducing a visible ethnic community, made up of Prakash, the young South Asian man that Mala is attracted to, and some other South Asian friends. One element is common to all these stories: the feeling of loneliness that these South Asian women experience, coupled with their need to build up their own “micro-societies” in America.

In Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s,” the eponymous character misses India and she feels terribly alone in America: “Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs would someone come?” (116). This significant image of screaming alone to draw some attention

symbolizes the urgency she feels for someone to be by her side. Unconsciously, Mrs. Sen constructs some kind of community with the boy she is babysitting, Eliot. She explains to him what she used to do in India, the Indian food she used to prepare and cook, evoking her homeland day after day: “Whenever there is a wedding in the family . . . my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades . . . and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping” (115). Mrs. Sen is terribly homesick, she needs India, as she cannot find in the American context the same communal bonds she had in India. She comes from a different place where community—at least extended family and friends—is crucial and pivotal in everyday life.

In “The Third and Final Continent,” the female character, Mala, has a secondary but significant presence in the narrative. As a matter of fact, the story depicts the everyday life in America of a South Asian man who has recently arrived from England.⁹³ However, I would like to move beyond the masculine character and narrator, and focus on Mala, who appears to be a mere “appendage” in the text and equally secondary for her own husband, who does not show any feeling of thrill when Mala finally arrives in the United States after being separated for so long: “I had no present for her apart from egg curry” (192). Mala is a minor “element” for the narrator’s life in America, as he implies throughout the story, and she spends her days alone, though it does not seem to be a great deal for her. However, as I mentioned above, the role of Mala is significant in that she is the one who tries to create some kind of community or “micro-society” for her family in the United States.

Before Mala’s arrival in America, her husband is depicted as a solitary man, displaced in his American daily life. He is a man who tries to adapt to his new location but, as we can read, he is “lost in translation”: in his attempt to follow an American diet, he says that he eats

93 Lavina Dhingra Shankar points out that this story is based on Lahiri’s father’s life (42).

“cornflakes and milk, morning and night,” every day, as he prefers this American food to hamburgers or hot dogs (175). Mala’s appearance brings India with her: Bengali food and clothes. The narrator even mentions how he is eating dinner with his hands again, something “[he] had not yet done in America” (192). The smells of curry, ginger and garlic in the small kitchen of their American apartment make the narrator feel “at home” again. Similarly, when Mala wants her American son to speak Bengali with them, she is consciously constructing and sustaining their community. The paragraph where the narrator describes their visits to their son, who is studying at university, epitomizes the idea of “micro-society”: “So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die” (197). Food and language create that sense of “ethnic” community. Bengali language and food –to be precise, the way they eat this food back “home” in India— are the cultural foundations which both the parents consider they have to keep and transmit to their American-born son. Thus, they “recreate” India in America, and I stress “recreate” because I agree with Rushdie’s thesis on “imaginary homelands”: Mala and her husband conceive their personal India, based on the memories of their homeland. They live away from their homelands, and this special situation makes memory a pivotal element in these narratives of exile. As Cristina Emanuela Dascalu has shown in *Imaginary Homelands of Writers in Exile*, memory must be understood not as nostalgia for a past they do not intend to go back to, but as the ability to reshape that past in a motion that intermingles the real with the subjective (22). Rushdie maintains, reality can have a metaphorical component that does not diminish its truth, Rushdie reminds us in “Imaginary Homelands.” Similarly, when Mala and her husband evoke the India that they left many years before, they are remembering “the India of their

mind,” a selective past they want to recollect and not forget, the only way they can think of to keep “India” alive in their new American existence.

In Lahiri’s “Hell-Heaven,” the main female character is different from the other wives in the previous stories. At the beginning of the narrative, it seems that the female protagonist, Aparna, conforms to the type of character depicted above, that is, a lonely South Asian woman who spends her days at home while her husband works at the university. Indeed, this constitutes the opening scene in the story. Nevertheless, Aparna attempts to break with this model, seeking some masculine company, Pranab, a young Bengali man, whose company and trips “outdoors” make her feel a different, happier woman, as the young narrator, Aparna’s daughter, describes: “I would return from school and find my mother with her purse in her lap and her trench coat on, desperate to escape the apartment where she had spent the day alone” (63).

Thus Lahiri tackles the theme of loneliness in these three narratives and, in doing so, she implicitly claims the necessity of a South Asian community that these characters feel. Although these South Asian American Eves are alone, their loneliness is different from the loneliness of the American Adam: they do not want to be alone to construct a new self. Loneliness is not a pre-condition for these women to attain their dreams, since they do not intend to abandon their previous selves and become someone else. However, their selves have already changed, even if they are not aware of it. As Alexander claims in *The Shock of Arrival*, these immigrants have metamorphosed themselves, they are not the same women who had left India a long time before.

There are some thematic points in common between the literary scenarios that Lahiri depicts in the three short stories discussed above and other narratives written by South Asian American women writers, such as Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* (1992), where Dimple’s

loneliness and the broken dreams she had conjured up about America prompt her to commit suicide. Likewise, in *Arranged Marriage* (1995), Chitra B. Divakaruni repeats the pattern of arranged marriages in several short stories, where the wives' lives are circumscribed to the domestic sphere, where they dream alone trying to understand and get to know American society. In the short story "Clothes," for instance, Divakaruni portrays a Bengali woman in America who, after losing her husband, feels lost in the new country, as her life has been confined to the domestic space. The final passage of this story suggests the protagonist's suicide as the only escape from her loneliness.

In Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine*, the eponymous protagonist embodies the antithesis of the female characters explored above. Whereas Mrs. Sen, Mala and Aparna are typically represented in a subordinated position, circumscribed to the domestic sphere, Jasmine runs away from any household commitment. Lahiri's female characters are not consciously "active characters" in the sense that they do not look for any change in their lives that might allow them to grow as characters; Jasmine aims to change her life and see what the "stars" have prepared for her. In *Jasmine*, there is no longing for her homeland or her past, unlike in Lahiri's stories. The narrator even recounts how she feels her late husband's ghost exhorting her: "Don't crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism" (96). *Jasmine* is thus a "*Bildungsroman*" tracing the ongoing evolution and self-transformation of a South Asian woman—Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane—who, as a female pioneer, seeks her future in America, never looking back to India, the past: "I had a past that I was still fleeing. Perhaps still am" (34).

One of my reasons for studying *Jasmine* here is that it has been read as depicting the immigrant's blind trust in the American Dream. Hume argues that, as a novel about immigrants, *Jasmine* perpetuates the Dream, a dream which has been abandoned in "non-ethnic" literature. It is my intention to prove that Jasmine, though she embraces the American

Dream, subverts the ethos of the Dream, since she unconsciously offers the reader a bitter critique of what the American Dream represents for immigrants. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* has received a great deal of negative criticism for its apology of the "white" American Dream. Jennifer Drake asserts that, in this novel Mukherjee, "rejects the expatriate nostalgia" (61), a longing and evocation of India that the young Jasmine does not feel, in contrast with the other female characters discussed here. In "Ethical Responsibility in Intersubjective Spaces," Gita Rajan identifies nostalgia as the feeling that implies a yearning for a "romanticized place called home" (127), and Jasmine's image of India is neither romanticized nor "homey." The "rejection of any nostalgia" that Drake attributes to Mukherjee's novel has been the object of much controversy, especially when combined with Jasmine's rejection of her past in India and her thrilled embrace of America and everything this country stands for. In her analysis of *Jasmine*, Susan Koshy criticizes both the novel and Mukherjee for accepting assimilation *tout court*, for resorting to exoticism, praising capitalism, and celebrating Western/American hegemony.⁹⁴ Inderpal Grewal also attacks the novel, stating that *Jasmine* does not represent and empower South Asian communities at all. In addition, the fact that Mukherjee *Jasmine* depicts American freedom in opposition to the constricted nature of South Asian traditions and lifestyle is interpreted by Grewal as a declaration of "subordination" to the "Imperialist" dominant American culture (196). Mukherjee defends herself against these (extra)literary and non-literary attacks, stating that *Jasmine* is a "fable" where the main character is trying to adapt to the new world and live the American Dream, hence the writer's decision "to give her [Jasmine] a society that was so regressive, traditional, so caste-bound, genderist, that she could discard it" ("An Interview" 46). If *Jasmine* is a fable, I would argue that it is also a veiled critique of the American Dream and the obstacles that American society sets up for the

94 I deliberately mention both the novel *Jasmine* and the writer, Mukherjee, since not only has the novel been the target of several critics but so have Mukherjee's own words praising the American Dream.

immigrants. Thus, I disagree with Grewal's scathing remarks and sweeping accusation that Mukherjee ignores South Asian women and minorities in *Jasmine*. For this critic, Mukherjee gives Jasmine the role of a "super woman," when compared with other "ethnic" characters that appear in the novel. Besides, Grewal condemns Jasmine's longing to fully participate in mainstream American society and her identification with the "dominant group": "Mukherjee's protagonist, Jasmine . . . is consequently presented as an anomaly among Asians and Asian women and outside all preexisting contexts and communities of struggle" (194). The foundation of Grewal's criticism is based on the use of precisely the same stereotypes that she condemns when judging *Jasmine*. Grewal is actually demanding a novel about the American Dream to engage in a revisionist history of the United States. When she calls *Jasmine* a typical American "super woman" compared to the other minority women depicted in the novel, specifically the other nannies she meets in New York, Grewal is implicitly affirming that a South Asian woman cannot be a "super woman" and, at the same time, she is stereotyping American women in general by calling them "super women." Thus, what Grewal condemns is what she herself ends up doing, that is, typecasting the characters in *Jasmine* according to some biased premises. Grewal claims that Jasmine's individualism and her desire to fully integrate in American society constitutes a statement against all "people of color" (144). What emerges from Grewal's statement is that "people of color" should not merge with "white" Americans. In affirming this, Grewal is also perpetuating the "difference" between "people of color" and "people of non-color." If *Jasmine*, as Mukherjee claims, is a fable, it is also tale about the American Dream. It portrays a woman's belief self-transformation in the new American context; Jasmine believes in her capacity to manage her own fate. However, the woman Mukherjee portrays in this story is not naïve, contrary to what some critics have suggested. Arguably, Jasmine can be considered naïve when, as a very

young girl, she marries her first husband in Punjab, when she “discovers” America through his eyes. However, after her brutal rape, Jasmine is no longer the same innocent girl; this time, she follows her own Dream, seeking her happiness in the new country. It is also true that there is some component of naïvety –some would say gullibility—in Jasmine’s belief in the Dream. And yet, such ability to believe is necessary for any dream to exist. Dreaming means expecting something (good) to happen. It is, after all, a conviction, a belief and, as in any belief there is an irreducible element of ingenuousness and trust.

In her more autobiographical *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, Mukherjee relates how she and her sisters loved to think about and fantasize about living in America, as well as the husbands they would meet there. In the light of Mukherjee’s words, this self-proclaimed disposition to “dream” about America, which Mukherjee describes when she writes about her childhood in Calcutta, is the “dream” she portrays in *Jasmine*, a novel about Mukherjee’s Dreams of America. Similarly, there is another parallelism between the Mukherjee depicted in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, and the protagonist of *Jasmine*. In *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, the author voices her “uniqueness” as the reason for her “self-confidence” (180), and her “difference” as what makes her “a mystery” (179); Jasmine similarly claims: “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” (200).

In *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*, David Leiwei Li contends that Mukherjee wants to “reexamine the fabled spirit of American individualism, manifest both in the personal conviction of self-transformation and in the political promise of social mobility” (92). As Li demonstrates, Mukherjee is not interested in claiming or pursuing any “racial consciousness” (93); rather, she just wants to tell a story about the American Dream lived and imagined by a South Asian immigrant woman.

Therefore, there is not any explicit longing for the past in *Jasmine*. Instead, there is a search for some kind of community as she always needs to have someone by her side. Nevertheless, when she lives in Flushing, an Indian ghetto, she does not feel comfortable either: “In Flushing I felt immured” (148). Jasmine rejects this type of “ethnic” community which can destroy her chances of accomplishing her dream in individualistic terms, she wants to know the city beyond the rivers (145). As a matter of fact, it seems that if Jasmine had remained in Flushing with the Professor’s family, as the story reveals, her dream would probably become as “fake” as the professor’s: “And Professorji was not a professor. He was an importer and sorter of human hair” (151). His life in America was a fraud that he had made up for his family and friends in India, and now Jasmine was getting involved in his lie: “He was buying my silence for his shame, and I felt the shame as well” (153). Jasmine eventually leaves the “ghetto,” where she “was spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness” (148).⁹⁵

If *Jasmine* is all about transformation, Flushing and its constraining barriers that preserve South Asian ethnicity in America symbolize a prison for Jasmine and an obstacle impeding her self-transformation. She then decides to move to Iowa. At that point, it seems that Jasmine has found her niche, living as one more “Ripplemeyer” in a mid-western community, but this momentary happiness vanishes when a man from her past reappears, offering her the possibility of an uncertain future. At the end of the narrative, Jasmine leaves Mid-West and, once more, head West, to look for her son and start a new life. The West is the ultimate territory where Jasmine goes to and also a space where her “distinctive” body, the way she used to feel in Iowa, will disappear, as the West has been traditionally the land where South Asians—and similarly color-coded immigrants—have headed.

95 In “An Alternative Diasporic Celebration in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,” Laura Peco Gonzalez explores Mukherjee’s rejection of ghettos and boundaries which only serve to enclose immigrants (112).

The presence of “community” is slightly different in each of these texts analyzed above. In particular, as mentioned in previous chapters, Chinese and South Asian immigrants have not shared exactly the same historical experience in America. In the South Asian American narratives analyzed here, much like what transpires from sociological and demographic surveys on South Asians, most male characters come to America to study or work at universities. We find this regular pattern in Lahiri’s and Mukherjee’s works. It seems that for these *male* immigrants there is not such a necessity to build up ethnic communities. Since they work or study at university, they have little or no need to build an exclusively ethnic community. In contrast, their spouses do need some kind of “expatriate” community to diminish their solitude. Their Chinese male counterparts, in contrast, have come to America to earn a living in any available occupation, but most of them end up working in laundries or in restaurants.⁹⁶ Ralph Chang represents those few Chinese men who had originally come to the United States as students, though he too ends up working at—and eventually managing—a restaurant.

We have seen how Hume maintains that since most ethnic literature concerns community, the American Dream in ethnic narratives is necessarily collective. However, as we will shortly see, the “ethnic” Dreams portrayed in these narratives are also individualistic, as each character comes to America with his/her own “preconception” of America and, to some extent, of the American Dream itself. Thus, the American Dream in these ethnic texts includes an individualistic dream, just as it did in “non-ethnic” narratives; but, at the same

⁹⁶ In *Chinese Americans* Joseph Gustaitis identifies laundry business and restaurants as the most common “of Chinese American-owned business” (54). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the percentage of Chinese men working in laundries in San Francisco was about one out of every five (Gustaitis 54). As regards Chinese restaurants, Sucheng Chan explains in *Remapping Asian American History*, how they became a great success in America, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. Americans were willing to try something exotic and Chinese restaurants were the best place to discover a food from a communist country they would never visit (22). Coincidentally Chan holds that it was not so weird that a Chinese with a degree ended up being a partner in a restaurant and eventually, the owner (23).

time, the immigrant often needs the community to attain her/his dream. The community comes to be seen as a “haven”—as Takaki suggests, an “ethnic island”—where immigrants’ social or economic needs are relieved, as it is there where they can find people like them, who speak the same language, eat similar food, etc. This is also the place where the newcomer, such as Moon Orchid, finds a “familiar” space where it is easier to look for a job. Hume’s view of ethnic Dream narratives as essentially collective would entail that an “ethnic” novel such as *Jasmine*—where Jasmine abandons her ethnic community in quest of her own particular dream—could be criticized as being a narrative that promotes an individualistic dream and disregards the ethnic community, as Grewal and others have suggested. However, Ralph Chang and even Brave Orchid would not fit into Hume’s view of the collective ethnic Dream either, since these characters’ dreams are also individualistic and personal. And yet, as Hume articulates, the American Dream in immigrant literature is always, at some point, a collective one; immigrants share the common experience of settling in a place where they are considered—at least initially and in most cases permanently—“foreigners.” Perhaps the major difference between the ways between how “canonical” and immigrant narratives approach the American Dream is that, in the latter, the dream also incorporates an obviously collective perspective.

In what follows I will tackle two other different “interpretations” of the American Dream that cannot be overlooked: the “Adamic” and the “Evenic” versions of the myth.

3.2. Adamic versus “Evenic” Visions of the American Dream

In his analysis of Fernimore Cooper’s *The Pathfinder*, Joel Porte evinced the masculine construction of the American Adam: “[the] American Adam knows intuitively how to avoid the error of his archetypal ancestor: he can only hope to retain possession of his American Eden if he makes a pact with the devil and they jointly exclude women from the virgin forest.” (28). Porte’s rather misogynist words stand as evidence of the masculinist interpretation of the early myth of the American Adam, which placed women in a marginal position, unable to engage in the dynamics of the American Dream. What is more, the American Dream was originally “white,” as discussed in previous chapters. It was only after a long painful journey that minorities finally managed to achieve what they had been claiming for decades, that is, their “place” in America and also in “American Dream” literature.

In the light of the “masculinist” nature of the American Dream, I intend to show, on the one hand, how the female characters depicted in the texts under study “participate” in or are “active forces” in the Dream, in an attempt to grasp the actual role of South Asian immigrants in a Dream that has been originally conjured up by and for “Anglo” or Euro-Americans. On the other hand, I will examine how the American Dream works for the “non-Anglo” male characters depicted in these novels, as they have likewise been historically marginalized in the “white” version of the American Dream.

South Asian American Eves: Jasmine

As mentioned earlier, the novel *Jasmine* has been the object of widespread and far from positive criticism concerning the portrayal of South Asian immigrants in America, as well as the negative image of India as the antithesis of the “powerful” and “civilized” America. In *Exploring the American Literary West*, David Río asserts the existence in the recent American literature of the West—since the 1960s, to be precise—of a new type of “multicultural” West, where the old masculine archetypes traditionally related to the West vanished in favor of a new version of the West coming to embrace the pluralistic nature of this territory as well as those groups that had been ignored before (17). And it is within this multicultural West that we can explore *Jasmine* as an example of a new West narrative. Carmen Faymonville has already pointed out the perspective of the myth of the West. Faymonville alludes to Jack Schaefer’s *Shane* (1949), an American Western, as an antecedent of Mukherjee’s novel. *Shane* portrays a lonely hero who undergoes a transformation as he heads towards the “sunset,” leaving his past behind. However, Faymonville puts the emphasis on the fact that *Jasmine* is more of a “Calamity Jane” than a new *Shane*, as *Jasmine* is a woman, to be more accurate, a South Asian woman, “pioneering” her dream in America. Faymonville identifies three main “visions” that converge in female immigration fiction when dealing with “the call of the West”:

first, “the making everything new” impulse of the immigrant who conceives of America as a utopia and the Promised Land; second, “the great pioneering spirit” of the frontier settlers and colonizers seeking a new Lebensraum seems to be replicated by the immigrants’ perception of economic advancement; and third, a cultural dialogue that

mediates between the past and the present, hovering between assimilation, ethnic nationalism, and hybridization/transnationalism. (253)

Faymonville covers all possible patterns that can be found in immigrant literature, considering that most of these narratives conceive America as a place where the immigrant can have a new beginning. Apparently, immigrant women's literature of the West do not differ too much from the corresponding "white" literature of the West. However, the third aspect Faymonville enumerates lets us glimpse the main difference between *Shane* and *Jasmine*, that is, the obstacle that the immigrant encounters, the attending cultural dialogue, and the resulting position both cultures reach in America. In this chapter, I will focus on the first characteristic delineated above, taking the traditional theme of the West and the pioneer/American Adam and translating it into the (South) Asian American Eve, a pioneer woman, heading West.

Faymonville claims that, according to the traditional myth of the frontier, women are expected to "adopt individualism and self-reliance"; however, contemporary non-Western pioneer women fail to do so, because this position is traditionally related to "white settler capitalism" (253). I agree with Faymonville and I also propose that the cultural baggage the (South) Asian immigrant woman carries with her can make it difficult for her to adapt to the individualistic character of the American "white" frontier. And yet, we should be careful to avoid over-generalization, since we can fall into the easy stereotyping of South Asian women, opposing them to "non-racialized" individualistic women pioneers. In fact, as I will discuss further on, this proneness to stereotyping *Jasmine* is what explains the origin of the main reviews which denounce the character's "unusual" individualistic "self." To avoid such stereotypes it is necessary to recognize a cultural "burden" that (South) Asian American immigrant women shoulder and which makes their "journey" in America different from other

non-immigrant characters, since there is, more often than not, a clash between their cultures of origin and the new American culture. Thus, these (South) Asian American immigrant characters need to juggle both cultures in an attempt to reach some equilibrium in their new lives in America.

Jasmine is a narrative of “journey and passage” (Ruppel 184). Throughout the novel, Jasmine never stays in one place for long. The ceaseless travelling that the novel depicts stresses the idea of constant movement. *Jasmine*’s fragmented structure, filled with flashbacks, changes of name and place, etc. differs from the traditional straightforward telling of Western narratives such as *Shane*. These temporal “breaks” that subvert the conventional narrative pattern are triggered by and correspond to the different stages that Jasmine undergoes during the transformation of her “self.” For Faymonville, *Jasmine* epitomizes the female immigration fiction of the West, as it tackles the three main “visions” that, as I mentioned above, converged in female immigrant fiction: Jasmine conceives America as a utopia, a dream she conjures up when she reads *Shane*. Jasmine cannot answer her first husband when he asks her what she thinks America is like; however, she implicitly acknowledges that she has an idea of America during her stay in Flushing, when she states that “Flushing was not the downtown of dreams” (151). Even when she is living with Bud in Iowa, has become pregnant, and expresses her desire to belong to the Ripplemeyer family and to the land she inhabits, she surprises the reader once more by leaving this apparently comfortable life and resuming her arduous journey across America, this time with (Anglo-American) Taylor. America is the promise of something new: “I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness” (240). Jasmine is looking for a new “Lebensraum,” as Faymonville points out, which is not Flushing, the Indian ghetto, nor Iowa.

The third “vision” of this type of immigrant fiction, according to Faymonville, that is, the cultural dialogue between past and present, is also featured in *Jasmine*. There is a continuous dialogue between present and past, represented in the numerous flashbacks to India and her past in America: Jasmine begins as Jane, a pregnant woman living in Iowa and, at the same time, the narrator evokes Jane’s past in India as Jyoti when an astrologer reads her future of “widowhood and exile” (3). This dialogue between past and present, India and America, will constitute the common pattern present throughout *Jasmine*’s narrative. Furthermore, the cultural clash is also depicted in Jasmine’s comments about her “distinctiveness”: “I felt too exotic, too alien” (202). When visiting the house of Karin, Bud Ripplemeyer’s ex-wife, Jasmine sees Bud’s old collection of toys, trains and horses, and she claims she does not feel identified with them, as they do not belong to her ‘world’.

Victoria Sullivan, in her analysis of the heroines in Mukherjee’s fiction from the 1980s, traces her development of her perspective, “from that of the immigrant or expatriate as victim and outsider to the immigrant as participant in the process of self-transformation” (267).⁹⁷ Like Faymonville, Victoria Sullivan identifies five “recurrent motifs” in Mukherjee’s new heroines⁹⁸. Jasmine embraces them all, as she is the heroine who, conscious and proud of her “distinctiveness,” does not mind taking the “risks involve[d] in exile, immigration, and, ultimately, transformation” (268). For Jasmine, traveling starts as an obligation; as Heidi Lettedahl Macpherson reminds us, Jasmine starts her journey after her

97 It is interesting to point out Mukherjee’s own distinction between immigrants and expatriates, a differentiation the South Asian writer specifies in her article “Imagining Homelands.” According to Mukherjee, immigrants accept and embrace the whole integration and they go the “full nine yards of transformation,” becoming part of their ethnic communities in the new country (71). On the other hand, expatriates consciously resist the whole transformation in both the ethnic and the host community.

98 Sullivan recognizes five recurrent motifs in these heroines’ “border-crossing”: the first motif is the tendency to come from a traditional Indian education where the women occupy a submissive position; the second, to experience a break with the past; the third, to be subject to racist attack; the fourth, to find themselves in “suspension” between “opposing cultural imperatives”; and the fifth, to recognize with pride their own experiences of immigration and exile, as well as the self-transformation embedded in them (268).

husband's death, because she goes to America in order to commit *sati* in memory of her murdered husband, Prakash, as her way of honoring him. Jasmine is portrayed as the supportive Indian wife following Prakash's own dream. The terrible passage of her rape by Half-face represents the turning point in Jasmine's "mission" in America, she becomes the "pioneer" of her "self," heading West in a relentless journey in search of her own happiness. Jasmine transforms her husband's dream into her own assignment, and, in contrast with her husband, Jasmine will emerge as Kali from the violence, as a "tornado" that sweeps away the past and clears the way to a better future. In my opinion, the frontier novel is the perfect framework to narrate Jasmine's journey to the West. Jasmine can be read as a South Asian American Eve –the counterpart of the popular American Adam— who wanders alone in America, heading west, towards the last frontier which appeals to her in much the same way. The old pioneers and cowboys, moving west in search of "new" land and consequently moving the frontier, constitute an old image that Mukherjee revivifies in *Jasmine*.

A separate story by Mukherjee, also entitled "Jasmine," and included in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, presents some significant parallelisms with the homonymous novel. In "Jasmine," Mukherjee portrays a young ambitious Indo-Caribbean woman from Port-of-Spain, who leaves Trinidad⁹⁹, depicted by the narrator as "an island stuck in the middle of nowhere" (128), and enters America illegally. On the surface, the beginning of this story resembles the beginning of the novel: both Jasmynes come to America as illegal immigrants. Nevertheless, in the short story the narrator mentions how Jasmine chose an illegal way to enter America since she could have got into the new country safely. Jasmine's intention is to work in the Plantation Motel, run by people from Trinidad, so we already glimpse some differences from the main character in the novel *Jasmine*. This "second"

99 Trinidad, a British colony from 1797 until 1962, served as destination for Indian indentured migrants. British authorities started the importation of South Asians to Trinidad in the year 1845 (Vertovec 91).

Jasmine does not face any rape episode in arriving America. Instead, the narrator insists on the fact that she works very hard and she does not want to be related to the Daboo sisters, as “Jasmine considered them too wild” (136). This Jasmine is naïve, though ambitious, whereas the Jasmine we encounter in the novel is depicted as a more complex woman, as her several names suggest. The difference between both characters lies in the fact that the novel’s character has lived through more experiences in America, even back in India, whereas the other Jasmine comes across as a simpler character whose life seems to be quite uneventful until she arrives in America. There is an initial moment in the story where the narrator relates how Mr. Daboo, the owner of the motel, kisses Jasmine during the celebration of New Year’s Eve. The narration is ambivalent enough for the kiss to be interpreted either as an innocent gesture, the mere consequence of the toast, or as the first attempt of “America” to corrupt Jasmine’s Dream. At the end of the story, there is a similar episode. Jasmine is babysitting a girl and the child’s father, Bill Moffitt —much like Taylor in the novel— suddenly shows some interest in the Trinidadian woman. However, unlike Taylor, the narrator describes this moment in colonial terms, where the American man meets the exotic girl: “You’re really something, flower of Trinidad” (138). Suddenly, there is a transformation in that innocent girl, who becomes “a girl rushing wildly into the future” (138). The previous quotation shows what the future of Jasmine, the innocent girl from Trinidad, will be like. At this point, especially with the use of the adverb “wildly,” we can discern a not-so-naïve Jasmine. The short story’s Jasmine appears to be conscious of her distinctive “racialized” body in the same way the character in the novel is. The promise of a future is evinced at the end of both narratives. There is no closure in “Jasmine,” just as there is no closure in the novel. Similarly, in both cases, there has been some kind of prediction about the future lives of these women. In the short story, Mr. Daboo foresees that “Is year for dreams coming true” (135), and her

encounter with Bill Moffitt may change her initial dreams in America. What seems significant at this point is the fact that both Jasmynes “pioneer” their lives in a new, difficult – rather than brave— world. A new context where their “Evenic” dreams are interrupted or altered by Adam’s own.

Chinese American Eves: Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid

In *The Woman Warrior* there are two Asian American Eves whose dreams are interwoven but whose achievements are completely different: Brave Orchid and her sister Moon Orchid. The two sisters epitomize two opposite “poles” despite their literal and metaphorical “sisterhood”. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong and Yuan Shu maintain that, in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston employs opposite female characters: “successful and unsuccessful, the active and passive, the articulate and inarticulate” (Shu 213). The interesting and peculiar connection between the two sisters, even if Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid play opposite roles, supports Shu and Wong’s thesis. On the one hand, Brave Orchid, the narrator’s mother, lives in America, and runs a laundry. As her name suggests, she is the brave one of the pair of sisters: she has given up her prestigious job as a doctor in China and has come to America, to work in her husband’s laundry and mother several children. She is the Asian American Eve who has abandoned her previous life to start up a different new life in America. Her sister, Moon Orchid, is presented as her antithesis. She has just arrived in America from China, pushed by her sister’s urging to recover the bigamist husband who had abandoned her in China thirty years before. The narrator articulates Brave Orchid’s feelings about the different personalities she and her sister have from the very moment of arrival at the airport: “Brave Orchid thought that if she were entering a new country, she would be at the windows. Instead

Moon Orchid hovered over the unwrapping, surprised at each appearance as if she were opening presents after a birthday party” (117). Moon Orchid seems to be the more passive of the two sisters, apparently useless and weak, in contrast with hard-working, resolute Brave Orchid.

In “Becoming American,” Zhou Xiaojing states that women in Kingston’s works play the role of the keepers of Chinese traditional culture and, in doing so, they remain “unassimilated foreigners” in the host country (152). However, the image Kingston gives of Brave Orchid in “At the Western Palace” is not that of a completely conservative woman, avid guardian of Chinese traditional values, though at times, especially when she is with her “Americanized” children, Brave Orchid champions the “goodness” of Chinese traditions. Brave Orchid is modern enough to realize how her sister’s habits could seem bizarre and even outdated in America. Moon Orchid’s gifts to Brave Orchid’s children are completely inappropriate in America, whereas they are things they would use if they lived in China: jade bracelets, fancy dresses, paper dolls. But Brave Orchid understands her sister’s feeble attempts to adapt to a country so different from China.

Brave Orchid shows an ambivalent attitude towards traditions and obligations, that is, on the one hand, she intends to preserve her family’s Chinese identity, protecting it from “Americanized” behaviors and, on the other hand, she sees how her sister’s Chinese traditions are pointless in America. It is, therefore, safe to argue that Brave Orchid embodies the dichotomy already suggested in her own name. As Sidonie Smith claims, the name Brave Orchid is unconceivable at least for Chinese readers, as “Orchid” is a possible female name whereas “Brave” would have masculine, warrior connotations; hence, Brave Orchid epitomizes a “yin/yang” “male/female” paradox difficult to grasp also in the context of Chinese culture (56). As the “brave” woman she is, Brave Orchid urges Moon Orchid to

accomplish her “mission” in America, that is, looking for and claiming her husband: “Your husband is going to have to see you. We’ll make him recognize you. . . . You yell at him too” (125). In the narrator’s mother, Kingston depicts a self-confident and brave woman, apparently adapted to the American lifestyle. Nevertheless, Kingston portrays a woman who cannot stand the idea of seeing her sister alone, without her husband. Kingston wants to emphasize Brave Orchid’s “in-between” situation: Brave Orchid has not yet achieved a position of equilibrium or compromise between her Chinese past and her American present.

In *Reciting America: Culture and Cliché in Contemporary U.S. Fiction*, Christopher Douglas maintains that Kingston “problematizes a concept central to the American Dream” (147), that is, the cultural difference between the “Old World” and America, where the old culture is rejected. Douglas’s statement echoes Boelhower’s discussion about the tensions existing in the isotopy “Old-World and New-World” in the context of immigrant autobiography. Boelhower affirms that the more the old world weighs on the immigrant, the more he/she will need to change and adapt and “project an ideal *terra incognita*,” the place of his/her dreams (“Immigrant Autobiography” 9). There is a “passage from one cultural sign system to a new one,” and during that process, the immigrant needs to translate his/her Old-World identity together with his/her conception of the New-World dream into a “real New-World self” (9).

In Kingston’s work, as Douglas contends, this cultural clash is reinterpreted by bringing the old culture to the arena and reformulating it “into American cultural material” (147). In the third chapter of the book, “Shaman,” Brave Orchid tells her young daughter about her life and experiences back in China, when she was a doctor. All through this section we find references to the distance between Brave Orchid’s Old-World culture and her New-World one: “Time was different in China. One year lasted as long as my total time

here” (106). However, this feeling of being in between cultures not only affects Brave Orchid, but also her daughter, the young narrator (106). Maxine needs to understand the weight Chinese culture has on her mother, and also on her self too. Maxine, as the American-born daughter of a Chinese mother, longs for some understanding between her Chinese legacy and her American present. Brave Orchid’s translation from her Old-World culture into her New-World culture results in a series of contrasts between both worlds, echoing Boelhower’s work on immigrant autobiography. This opposition between the Old and the New culture is clearly reflected in “Shaman,” thus disclosing the cultural adaptation immigrants need to undergo (11)¹⁰⁰.

In a later chapter, “At the Western Palace,” the use of a third-person narrator also allows Kingston to contrast the gap between the newly arrived Moon Orchid, the epitome of the Old World, and Brave Orchid, the partially acculturated sister (Whitson 137). But this section also reveals the cultural distance between Brave Orchid and her American children. Brave Orchid embodies the dichotomy between the old culture and the new one, as she considers her children too “Americanized” in their habits: “How greedy to play with presents in front of the giver. How impolite (‘untraditional’ in Chinese) her children were” (121). Brave Orchid suggests a more properly Chinese “modus operandi” when dealing with her American children, but, at the same time, she sees her sister’s gifts to the children and even her customs as out of place and time. Both sisters have left something behind in China, when following the Dream: Brave Orchid, as she herself admits, abandoned her career as a doctor and Moon Orchid abandoned her false, easy life. Thus, both women “pay” some price in coming to America. Certainly, Brave Orchid at some point regrets what her life has become:

¹⁰⁰ In “Shaman,” reality and fantasy intertwine as Brave Orchid relates her episodes in the ghost room, where she confronts the “sitting ghost” (69) and survives. By juxtaposing both cultures, Brave Orchid creates in her daughter some confusion, which is represented in Maxine’s ghosts, who also populate her American reality: “Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts” (97).

“You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America” (77). Nevertheless, the elderly Brave Orchid admits that, despite what she lost when she left China, she does not want to go back: “I don’t want to go back anyway . . . I’ve gotten used to eating” (107). While Brave Orchid does not reject her past, she has also learned to accept and even celebrate many aspects of the new, American culture. Obviously, she has sacrificed an important part of her previous life, but she is a different woman now, and seeing her younger sister, now old, revives in Brave Orchid this dichotomy, the opposition between her old world and her new context.

Moon Orchid’s dream of recovering her husband and starting a new life in America seems to be her sister’s project rather than hers, as Moon Orchid does not really know what she is doing: When her sister asks her what she is going to do concerning her husband, Moon Orchid answers: “I don’t know. Do we have to do something?” (124). In fact, when Brave Orchid urges her to look for her husband Moon Orchid defends him: “He didn’t abandon me. He’s given me so much money. I’ve had all the food and clothes and servants I’ve ever wanted.[. . .] I can’t bother him. I mustn’t bother him”(125). As can be gleaned from this excerpt, Kingston depicts Moon Orchid as a dependent person: in Hong Kong she relies on her husband’s money as well as on the illusion of being married, whereas in America she needs her sister by her side in order to be happy. The episode when Brave Orchid urges her sister to confront her husband unleashes Moon Orchid’s fears and insecurities: “‘I’m scared’ . . . ‘I want to go back to Hong Kong’” (125). Moon Orchid had contemplated some change in her life; her “encounter” with “her idea of America” has even been pleasant for her. However, “Moon Orchid’s America” seems to be circumscribed to her sister’s house, Chinatown, and the prospects of a “new” life she impatiently observes. Sadly, after reencountering her husband, Moon Orchid gradually slips into madness, and ends up

spending her last days in a mental asylum. Moon Orchid, this “Eve” “on the Moon,” cannot adapt to the New World in the way her brave sister has already done. Moon Orchid’s life, anchored in the past, interferes with and destroys any possible cultural adaptation; her translation into the New World fails, and this failure is symbolized in her final collapse.

Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid embody the ambivalent nature of the American Dream. America has given these two sisters many things, but they have also paid a “price.” Both Eves had a past life in China which they must forget; hence America represents for them a blank slate. Just like the old “male” pioneers, these Asian/American Eves came to a “new land” with their minds full of expectations. The difference between them and the first settlers is that the latter did not follow any spouses. As Lim states, Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid have followed the impulse of the West. Both have gone to the Gold Mountain following their husbands, the ones “who have been lured Westward by the dream of success and prosperity” (147). In some ways, Lim’s interpretation conforms with my hypothesis of (South) Asian American Eves, as these two women came to America after their husbands but also, with some inner expectations that led each in her “quest for identity as wife and matriarch” (Lim 147). It is worth remarking that most of the (South) Asian American Eves examined in this chapter come to America “after” their husbands, with the exception of the character in “Jasmine.” However, though this general pattern is especially common in works by (South) Asian American writers, it should not be taken as the paradigm in “ethnic” literature, as there are other patterns¹⁰¹.

¹⁰¹ A brief overview of the most significant South Asian American Eves reveals that there are alternative possibilities to the recurrent scheme described here. Other women in Asian American writing, as a matter of fact, are shown to have come to America on their own, such as Mukherjee’s protagonist in “A Wife’s Story,” who wants to come to America to study and “feel” complete, even at the expense of her husband, who does not agree with her “American adventure.” In Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma, a Bengali lawyer married to an American husband, tries to adapt to the presence of her father in her life. Divakaruni’s “A Perfect Life” presents a female protagonist whose life falls apart when she meets and tries to adopt a “wild” boy who suddenly appears in her life. There are also memoirs such as Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days* or Meena Alexander’s *Fault Lines* which undermine the traditional patterns and gender roles which have been recurrent in the Asian (American) context.

South Asian American Eves in Lahiri's Fiction

Lahiri's three "South Asian American Eves," Mrs. Sen, Mala and Aparna, have similarly followed a pattern when coming to America: all of them have come through an arranged marriage, joining their husbands who are already living in the United States. This coincidence in terms of a common thematic structure is also echoed in other South Asian American writers, such as Divakaruni and her *Arranged Marriages*. In most of Divakaruni's short stories, South Asian women spend their days "at home" in America, whereas their husbands work and study in the public sphere. There is an implicit critique of the gender roles within the Asian context. In her fiction, Divakaruni underscores how "out of place" Bengali traditions are in America. In *The Middleman and Other Stories*, Mukherjee equally criticizes the situation experienced by Bengali women. "A Wife's Story" depicts the gender conflicts in a Bengali couple and the woman's attempt to move beyond those cultural and traditional schemes imposed on her. When dealing Lahiri's portrayals of South Asian women and men, some critics consider that, despite the fact that she shares thematic patterns with other South Asian American women writers, her approach to gender issues is rather different. In her article "Looking through the Glass House," Antonia Navarro Tejero underlines this difference between Lahiri and Divakaruni, arguing that Lahiri focuses on "the human condition of being an immigrant," whereas Divakaruni conceives and formulates immigration as a "liberating agent" for Bengali women (131). I agree with Navarro Tejero to the extent that Lahiri does not portray victims who need to be saved from the burden of Indian traditions; however, in a more subtle way than Divakaruni, Lahiri presents similar themes of abuse and of loneliness among South Asian women immigrants. The female characters in Lahiri's fiction that we are

focusing on are lonely Eves, normally displaced to a secondary position, and silent in the new and alien space that America represents for them. In fact, as we will see later in more detail, the narrators in these three texts are coincidentally the male protagonists or, in the case of “Hell-Heaven,” Aparna’s American-born daughter.

In Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s,” a South Asian woman whose first name we never know, spends her days feeling homesick in America. She did not apparently come to America following her dream, but following her husband, probably as a result of an arranged marriage. These lines could also describe the beginning of *Jasmine*’s novel, but, as I will discuss later, the evolution of both characters is completely different. At one point in Lahiri’s story, Mrs. Sen confesses to Eliot, the American boy she is babysitting and who becomes her only acquaintance, that she cannot send any picture to her family in India, as she cannot show them her real life in America: back home, they all think she is living in a palace (125). This passage is echoed in another of Lahiri’s works, her novel *The Namesake*, where the narrator reveals Ashima’s disappointment when she sees her new apartment in America: “Instead she writes, in her letters home, of the powerful cooking gas that flares up at any time of the day or night from four burners on the stove, and the hot tap water fierce enough to scald her skin, and the cold water safe enough to drink” (30). As Amitava Kumar puts it in *Passport Photos*, immigrants, even when their dream is not fulfilled, send letters home pretending they are living the American Dream. Therefore, Lahiri resorts to the same strategy in “Mrs. Sen’s” and *The Namesake*. In both cases the women characters voice their “disillusionment” with America by sending letters where they convey their dreamed idea of America. Thus, when there is a disappointment, it is because there have been previous expectations about America—the seed of an American Dream—, even though they have not been openly voiced.

Mrs. Sen does not resemble Mukherjee's resolute Jasmine, probably because Mrs. Sen lacks Jasmine's tragic past. Whereas Jasmine flees from her traumatic past, Mrs. Sen just wants to recreate her Indian life in America. Mrs. Sen could be compared to Mala, the character in "The Third and Final Continent," who also comes to America to meet her husband after an arranged marriage; once there, and she spends her days alone cooking and knitting at home. Mala, however, seems to be quite happy and receptive to her new life, as her husband (a reliable narrator?) tells us, she always has some food ready for him at any time and she can shop alone with the few dollars he can give her. In "Not Too Spicy: Exotic Mistresses of Cultural Translation in the Fiction of C. Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri," Lavina Dhingra Shankar suggests that Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent" can be interpreted as an exaltation of the ability the immigrant has to adapt not only to a new country, but to a second new one, since the protagonist travelled from India to America, the third continent, through England. Shankar maintains that the first-person narrator is modeled on Lahiri's father. When the unnamed narrator and protagonist of the story describes his everyday life with Mala, if we discern the shadow of Lahiri's father, maybe it is Lahiri's choice that the tone should not be very pessimistic, as the narrator is recalling his life with his family and "his" achievements in America. Lahiri's female characters are South Asian American Eves whose "passage" in America, as Leah Harte observes, will "reconstruct" their lives, selves, and Dreams (75). Harte's observation confirms how Mala is to some extent eager and expectant about the change her life is about to undergo in America. In contrast, Mrs. Sen seems to need somebody by her side to help her to overcome her terrible loneliness. As the omission of a personal name suggests, Mrs. Sen feels that, on her own, she is a "nobody." This South Asian Eve cannot really follow the model of the old pioneer (woman), individualistic and self-reliant, because she still has a cultural baggage she must "adapt" to

the new context. “Hell-Heaven,” the third short story by Lahiri that appears in *Unaccustomed Earth*, repeats the same paradigm of a lonely South Asian woman, Aparna, who comes to America following her husband, who works at a university. In this story the narrator is Aparna’s adolescent daughter, who recounts her mother’s special relationship with a young Bengali student man, a friend of the family. At the beginning, the narrator is just a girl and she does not really see anything else in this relationship, but, as the story progresses, the girl realizes that this apparent friendship could have become something more than that:

I did not know, back then, that Pranab Kaku’s visits were what my mother looked forward to all day, that she changed into a new sari and combed her hair in anticipation of his arrival, and that she planned, days in advance, the snacks she would serve him with such nonchalance. That she lived for the moment she heard him call out “Boudi!”(63)

For Aparna those moments with her male friend represented the “escape” from her domestic labors, her only chance to “live” some moments of joy in her new American life. Once again, Lahiri produces a story where the woman is relegated to the domestic sphere. However, this time Lahiri allows her Eve some degree of happiness, which lasts as long as her infatuation with the young man: “He brought to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt. . . . He was the one totally unanticipated pleasure in her life” (67). If we compare her with the characters in the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Mala and Mrs. Sen, at least Aparna finds momentary happiness. The very title of the story, “Hell-Heaven,” captures that dichotomy: a South Asian immigrant, Aparna, caught between the “Hell” her life in America represents and the “Heaven” she had temporarily enjoyed in one man’s company. The title, admittedly a bit melodramatic, also suggests the situation experienced by the narrator, Aparna’s young daughter, and her attempts to live as an

“American” girl. This “Hell-Heaven” dichotomy could equally apply to Mrs. Sen’s personal story of loneliness and, to a lesser extent, to Mala, in “The Third and Final Continent.”

At one point in the narrative it looks as if Aparna is closer to “Heaven” than to “Hell”, on the verge of becoming another Jasmine, a Bengali woman who leaves her past life behind and starts her journey alone towards her self-fulfillment. However, the conclusion of the story is predictable, in view of Lahiri’s tendency to avoid “difficult” situations. Her stories are mildly critical not only of the American characters, as Shankar claims in “Not Too Spicy,” but also, in my opinion, of the South Asian characters. At the same time, Lahiri is careful not to unsettle any audience; she prefers to tell immigrant stories where cultural clashes, feelings and fears are described in a very subtle way¹⁰². As mentioned before, Shankar has perceptively noted that most American characters depicted in Lahiri’s narratives are conceived as “sympathetic characters” (“Not Too Spicy” 38), as Lahiri does not want the American reader to feel “attacked,” but the same is also true of the South Asian characters. Lahiri writes about the Dream, and in doing so she does not apparently seek to condemn any situation or character. Lahiri just tells immigrant stories from a “safe” perspective: “Lahiri is careful not to criticize populations that constitute her audience . . .” (38). Yet, despite the “sensible, conservative” surface, there is a “subtle” critique of many issues—the American Dream, marital relations, arranged marriages, and cultural clash—which I shall examine more fully in subsequent chapters.

Let us conclude by asserting that, even if, at first sight Lahiri’s stories are deceptively simple and even allegedly “superficial,” a subtler reading of her fiction reveals a very

¹⁰² Thus, at the end of “Hell-Heaven,” as usually happens in Lahiri’s stories, there is a final moment of reconciliation or understanding, where Lahiri, once more, proffers the most suitable and sensible conclusion: Pranab marries another woman and Aparna becomes an avid watcher and keeper of the traditions, trying to control the American influence on the other Eve, her daughter: “Don’t think you’ll get away with marrying an American, the way Pranab did” (75).

interesting approach to the American Dream.¹⁰³ As a writer, Lahiri does not openly condemn any situation or character, but intelligently allows the reader to reach her/his own conclusion about the “maladjustments,” “hyphens,” and encounters between first and second-generations immigrants (Dutt-Ballerstadt 55). Lahiri’s fictional universe is full of South Asian Eves whose loneliness and vulnerability in America epitomize the failure of their American Dream. Her stories are far from trivial, as they portray a microcosm of many broken Dreams, whose shards we readers pick up and brood over.

Chinese American Eves: Helen and Theresa

In *Typical American*, Jen portrays Ralph Chang’s American Dream, “accessorizing” his masculinist dream with two seemingly secondary female characters: Helen, Ralph’s dedicated wife, and Theresa, Ralph’s tomboyish sister, who is the last one to come to America. At the beginning of this story, both Eves personify the old archetypal role that women played in a “gendered” (masculinist) American Dream: they help Ralph in the attainment of his dream, but always keeping an “inessential” position in “his” Dream. Helen and Theresa epitomize those first wives and sisters who came to America following their husbands/fathers’ Dream. Ralph’s “tough trip” to get his personal Dream is made at the expense of both his sister’s and wife’s choices and dreams. Paradoxically enough, even as they become the target of Ralph’s anger and frustrations, Helen and Theresa work to sustain his Dream. It may seem that the role these two women have in a story of masculine success is a secondary one. However, Jen lays the ground for these women’s actions to be meaningful and determinant in Ralph’s Dream. The emphasis on Ralph’s determined infatuation with the

¹⁰³ Lahiri, like Kingston, Mukherjee and Jen, has garnered numerous prestigious awards, among them the Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000. She is decidedly not an opportunist writer of best-sellers.

original conception of a “masculinist” Dream, in which we can see that the real active forces are Theresa and Helen, makes these two women reemerge later in the story as instrumental in determining Ralph’s ultimate fate.

Theresa’s first appearance in the novel is framed by the comical descriptions the narrator provides of her “unfeminine” physical look. Certainly, from the very beginning of the story, she is not depicted as the typical Chinese “wife-to-be”: “[d]rawn face, brown hair, big mouth, freckles. . . . It was a paradigm of Western influence gone wrong. Her father had insisted on giving the children cow’s milk, with the result that Theresa turned out into a giantess—five seven! (47).¹⁰⁴ Theresa’s inability to find a husband culminates in the humorous and sarcastic episode where the narrator finely describes the moment when she needs to hide herself with a parasol from the gaze of her husband-to-be. As she did with the earlier story, “In the American Society,” Jen engages the reader by means of an exceptionally wry narrative. Once her family realizes that Theresa cannot find any suitable partner because of her “Amazonian” physical appearance, they arrange to send her to America. If Theresa cannot find her place in China, neither does she succeed to do so in America, where her brother Ralph also perpetuates Theresa’s misery as by continuously teasing her. When Theresa starts in Medical School, Ralph begins “to call her Know-It-All again, first behind her back, then to her face” (75). Zhang identifies the special relationship between Ralph and Theresa, a relation that succeeds as long as Ralph can ridicule Theresa and she can endure it, “accept[ing] her position as the object of mockery” (47). When Theresa falls in love with the “wrong” man, Ralph breaks the bond with his sister, as he cannot tolerate that Theresa can be with Old Chao, a married man who used to be Ralph’s mentor.

104 This scene echoes the famous “matching scene” in Jade Snow Wong’s memoir *Fifth Chinese Daughter*—where her parents try also to arrange her marriage—which ends with the realization “alas, you were born too tall!” (232).

Ralph epitomizes the patriarch, the leader of the Chang household, and he is fond of this role, ruling his household with a very traditional attitude: “At home, the husband would command, the wife obey” (69). When Theresa disobeys her brother, Ralph repudiates her. Nevertheless, Theresa will eventually return to Ralph’s house. Theresa needs to go back to Ralph’s family, which is also hers; this family represents for Theresa her only connection to China and her past life¹⁰⁵. Thus, towards the end of the novel, in the section entitled “The Whole Family, Together,” after being rejected by her brother, her only family in America, Theresa finally comes back home with Ralph, but continues her affair with Old Chao in front of her brother: “Old Chao and Theresa were stiff with each other, embarrassed in front of Helen. With time, though, everyone adjusted” (267). Theresa is a Chinese American Eve who has come to America expecting some change in her life. As her life in China was pointless, as she did not conform to the Chinese traditional model of femininity, Theresa’s journey to the new world involves a departure from her previous life. Indeed, her character will evolve during the narrative, becoming more assertive and pragmatic. She will abandon Chinese-sanctioned behaviors and values to join the American “wild” lifestyle; having an affair with a married man is the most conspicuous sign of that change.

Helen, the other “Eve” in this story, is initially depicted as a “dislocated” woman who has renounced her predictable past life in China by coming to America and marrying Ralph: “And she married Ralph, officially accepting what seemed already true—that she had indeed crossed a violent, black ocean; and that it was time to make herself as at home in her exile as she could” (63). She tries to cope with her new situation by becoming a complacent spouse, in keeping with Ralph’s Confucian idea of a wife: she learned to cook, “studied harder, walked more, bought new clothes, wrote her parents less” (63). However, Helen, as a Chinese

¹⁰⁵ She misses her family, she cannot cope with being alone, even after adopting two cats which she significantly names after her nieces, Mona and Callie.

American Eve, needs to embark on her own “quest.” Zhang is surely right to argue that Helen does not accept her role of “wife” in traditional terms (40). After her “silenced” first appearance in the story where she used to spend hours staring and sitting still (Jen 63), Helen “wakes up,” becoming an articulate woman who really decides everything in the household. A chapter title announces “Helen is Home,” and in fact this chapter shows Helen as the still center of a turning world: “Helen by that time was growing more and more still. She was her resourceful self, but she was also an instinctive counterweight to Ralph’s activity—a fixed center” (115). In this passage the narrator reveals a different Helen, the “center of the household” (115), whose change is related to her secret: she has fallen in love with Grover, and this affair conducted behind Ralph’s back makes Helen feel more self-confident. It is the only time in Helen’s life that she can really decide her own actions: “and she saw herself wildly in love. He lived for her, only for her. And in her dreams, she lived for him too, this man her parents would never have picked” (116). Helen becomes a woman who is conscious of what she wants and ignores the traditional roles Ralph tries to establish in the household. After her failed affair with Grover, when she realizes his actual intentions, she turns to Ralph and tries to help him and his dream, embodied in the Fried Chicken Palace.

In “Translating and Transforming the American Dream: Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Gish Jen’s *Typical American*,” Weimin Tang maintains that the female characters in *Typical American* are subordinated to Ralph’s dream, a dream that merges “the male self-making of ‘legendary America’” with his fondness for patriarchal Confucian patterns (134). Helen’s and Theresa’s prospects in America are completely peripheral to and dependent on the leader of the household. As a reaction to Ralph’s “supremacy,” they will “flee” from him in a metaphorical way: Helen’s romance with Grover will prove to herself she has her own individuality and she can “decide” about her life, whereas Theresa will be

able to “break” some traditional Chinese norms, making public her forbidden love affair. Unfortunately, it seems that, in the end, both Chinese American Eves are punished for their “sins”: Helen lies dying in a hospital, whereas Theresa is condemned to social obliteration. As Lee suggests, Helen’s tragic end proclaims what happens to “the narrative of masculine self-making without the presumed obedience of women” (64).

It is my contention that, in *Typical American*, Jen criticizes and satirizes the traditional myth of the American Dream, revealing how both Eves—Theresa and Helen—are punished for not remaining in a silent subordinated position in Ralph’s masculine Dream. Thus Jen is denouncing the masculinist core of the myth. These women’s tragic ends subvert Ralph’s dream, since he will be forced to question whether his Dream is worth the pain and suffering inflicted on them, especially on his wife (296). Anyway, Helen and Theresa are two more (South) Asian American Eves who, in the shadow of their husband/brother, try to attain some happiness through love, something that makes them feel less lonely in Ralph’s world. As Leland S. Person argues, the myth of the Dream has traditionally regarded women as “obstacles” and symbols of what can make Adam’s Dream fail (668). In *Typical American*, Helen and Theresa are portrayed as the ones who dismantle Ralph’s Confucian and Puritan idea of himself in America. The emphasis on Ralph’s concern with losing his patriarchal role in the household accentuates the misogynist view embedded in traditional narratives of the Dream, a view that Jen wants to scrutinize and ultimately attack in her novel.

If we compare this novel with the earlier short story “In the American Society,” we can observe Jen’s intention of investing women with active roles as participants in a quintessentially masculine Dream.¹⁰⁶ “In the American Society” initiates the saga of this

106 *Mona in the Promised Land*—the sequel of *Typical American*—world represent Jen’s ultimate emphasis on female characters as the novel focuses mainly on the character of Mona Chang, a second-generation Chinese American who wants to become Jewish. Mona tries to live her “dream” of changing and transforming her “self,” her identity in order to be Jewish.

Chinese family in America, and the role of the female characters in the story is crucial, as they are the ones who take Ralph out his personal “kingdom” and make him face “reality.” Helen and Callie, mother and older daughter, are “active forces” of change in contrast with Ralph’s passivity and “seclusion” in his self-made world. Helen seems to be the more realistic of the pair, as she foresees her husband’s inability to adapt to unfamiliar situations. At the same time, both Eves are quite naïve, as they cannot predict Ralph’s imminent “fall” in terms of the “real,” mainstream America. Jen portrays Helen as a woman who embodies the rag-to-riches philosophy: “She didn’t work at the supermarket anymore . . . she herself was now interested in . . . and most recently, the country club” (115). She participates actively in the Dream and attempts to go beyond their secure “micro-society” and join the quintessentially “white” American country club. By joining the club, Helen would achieve her ultimate Dream of becoming a “full member” of American society, abandoning Ralph’s “own society.” Unfortunately, the satirical resolution of the story reminds the Changs of their “real” place in America. Callie, the daughter-narrator, is indeed the promoter of joining a club. In a story of her father’s Dream in America, Callie assumes the role of the narrator, displacing the “real” Adam of the story, Ralph. Ultimately, this story about the masculine Dream is demolished by Eve’s participation in that Dream. However, this time, Jen’s critique lies not just in her focus on the gendered core of the myth, but also in her emphasis on the “racial” component of the Dream: the Changs’ difference in terms of their physical appearance constitutes an obstacle that will prevent them from ever feeling fully welcome “in the American society.”

In Jen’s complementary short story, the role of Helen and Mona as annihilating forces that obliterate Ralph’s “safe” idea of America is significant. Even when the story starts with the subtitle “In his own society,” alluding to Ralph’s own “micro-society,” where he feels that

his dreams—economic and social—are accomplished, the female narrator immediately puts forward her intention to change Ralph’s world as the ambivalent title of the subsequent subsection reveals: “In the American Society.”¹⁰⁷ Helen, Mona and Callie take on active roles in a story that begins as just another tale about the masculine American Dream: “‘I’ll talk Dad into it,’ said Mona . . . ‘You’re not going to talk anything. You’ve already made enough trouble,’ [said Helen]” (120). As also happens in *Typical American*, the Eves dismantle Ralph’s secure world, since both women take Ralph out of his own society, showing him the “real” world. In this contact with real mainstream America, Ralph fails to “adapt” to the circumstances. The “body” represents a visible barrier in Ralph’s attempt to join “America.” Jen articulates this tragedy in the same ironic tone that characterizes *Typical American*.

In his article on Jen’s stories, Feddersen considers some parallelisms between the author’s ironic finesse with Lacan’s idea of the “real,” which interrupts human experience with an “absurd, sometimes ironic tone” (203). The irony that Jen uses in her narratives about the American Dream contributes to creating some distance between the narrator and the story itself. The irony also gives these narratives an undetermined moral position as they critically examine the archetypal American Dream and its failure in gender and ethnoracial terms. Jen’s Eves—Helen, Theresa, Mona and Callie—share a common bond, that of being the active forces in a scenario where, traditionally, Eves have been either passive or altogether absent.

107 The use of “the” can suggest a double interpretation: on the one hand: “the” implies the society at large, but it can likewise refer to the private club or “society.” Nevertheless, both perceptions are pertinent as the story describes Ralph’s own society in contrast with the mainstream American one, as well as the private club/society where the Changs try to become members.

The “Quintessential” Chinese American Adam: Ralph Chang

In Jen’s works, Ralph Chang emerges as a clear epitome of the “ethnic” American Adam. As we have seen, in the short story “In the American Society” he is portrayed as a newly arrived Chinese immigrant who shows confidence in what he does. His interests, as we know from the sequel to this short story, are primarily economic. However, he wants to live his American Dream in the best way possible, always, in theory, as a “man of principles.” Ralph embodies the Asian American Adam, the self-made man who follows his American dream: “A man is only so big as his dream” (220), he proudly claims. However, the way Jen portrays Ralph’s “Big Dream,” through the narrator’s ironic voice, emphasizes his naivety and at times creates a comical effect and: “Lightly hitched to society, he imagined himself bound to grander forces” (87). The narrator continuously satirizes Ralph’s “Big Dreams” in America; for example when Ralph buys a lamp, the narrator sarcastically remarks: “Already he [Ralph] had a history in America” (140). In his dissertation *Negotiating Masculinity: Rereading Male Figures in Gish Jen, Frank Chin, Gus Lee, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s Novels* (2009), Zhang argues that Ralph gains and reinforces his “manliness” by purchasing a house (52). Thus, the symbol of the house would stand for Ralph’s wealth and material success in America and also for his masculinity. Weimin Tang likewise points out Ralph’s need to reaffirm his “manliness” in his household: “[his] belief in traditional patriarchal Confucian teachings merges well with the male self-making” (134) embedded in the traditional, masculinist interpretation of the American Dream, as discussed in previous

chapters. In *Typical American*, where the Chinese American Adam embraces and even vindicates the spirit of the old Dream, “masculinity” is both present and problematized.¹⁰⁸

In *Imagining the Nation*, Li emphasizes Ralph’s “individualism,” an important element in the myth of the American Adam, but Li points out that Ralph’s “unconscious” “Confucian individualism” differs from the “American ‘possessive individualism’ from which Franklin and Gatsby draw their inspirations” (104). According to Li, Confucian individualism observes the individual rights and status without forgetting the ultimate existence of a “social scene” where the individual would “define the self in ‘a web of reciprocal obligations’” (104). Hence, Confucian individualism does not ignore the group, the community. Ralph’s difficulties in adapting his Confucian background to his “American” reality is what leads him to the final collapse of his Dream. At the same time, like Whitman’s American Adam, Ralph is also innocent, so innocent that his American Dream will turn into an American Nightmare when he meets Grove, his foil. Having initially been Ralph’s mentor, a wealthy Chinese American “imagineer” he wanted to emulate, take Grove takes advantage of Ralph’s blind belief in the Dream- Grover thus embodies the “dark side” of the myth; he is a self-made man “millionaire friend” that has achieved his Dream by sacrificing something, in this case, his morals and principles. In Grover, Jen reformulates Franklin’s list of what is needed to become a proper “self-made man” and she shows us how a credo loses its integrity when the Dream is just interpreted as individual economic success. Ultimately, Grover “violates” Ralph’s domestic sphere and also his Dream in America.

¹⁰⁸ At one point in the novel Ralph wants to reinforce his position in the house, his position as the “leader” in a house silently governed by Eves. The symbol of the “house” becomes the symbol of wealth, as happens in *The Great Gatsby*, where Gatsby’s Dream is closely related with his material success, epitomized in his car and his mansion. These are symbols of economic power, wealth, and the realization of a Dream, which, as I will discuss later, becomes a nightmare for its dreamers, dreamers in Jen’s narratives, as was the case in Fitzgerald’s novel back in the 1920s.

Therefore, Grover and Ralph embody the two sides of the American Dream. Ralph is portrayed from the beginning of the book as a man of principles who seems to be fond of Franklin's idea of the self-made man. When Ralph meets Grover, a dishonorable self-made man who has become who he is by betraying people, Ralph cannot but admire him: after all, Grover has accomplished the Dream. Both men are two different Adams who share the same dream: an economic one. Ralph could be identified with Jay Gatsby, the man for whom all things are possible, as Lois Tyson contends, at the same time that he reminds us of Emerson or, at least, the Emerson we see in his autobiography, *Infinitude of the Private Man*, the man who traces his own story of success (23). Ralph's ambition evokes an old idea of the Dream where Adams such as Gatsby are exonerated from any non-heroic act. Tyson maintains that *The Great Gatsby* has been considered as the main representation of an "idealized" American Dream as well as "an absolute positive value of pristine origin," where Gatsby's own fall is interpreted as a consequence of the circumstances surrounding him (40). Thus, this pureness of the myth comes to be corrupted by the same "moral wasteland" that continues to spread into the "core of the American society" (40). Jen tries to make Ralph an Asian American Gatsby, according to Li, and this is reinforced by the striking similarity between the scenes involving a car accident in both novels (Li 106). The ultimate failure of both Gatsby and Chang lies in the fact that their dreams were nothing more than idealistic illusions. Tragic heroes like Gatsby and Chang personify the failure of America's promise of success.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, Gatsby shows the corruption existing in a society that praises heroes who are corrupted precisely because of the society that they live in. As Li contends, the difference

¹⁰⁹ As Kenneth E. Eble contends, canonical American authors like Fitzgerald have examined American society through the prism of the novel of manners, showing a "concern for moral behavior measured against social norms" (96). In particular, Eble traces a parallelism between Fitzgerald's and Howells's novels of manners, since "[both] show the novel of manner's concern for moral behavior measured against social norms" (96). *Typical American* can be described as a "novel of manners," though I would say Jen's novel is more akin to American version of the genre than to Jane Austen's older model. We would thus claim that Gatsby and Chang represent Howells' typical "antiheroes" who are unable to separate their greed from their Dreams.

between Ralph and Gatsby is that Gatsby is an individualistic hero, whereas Ralph's fall takes his whole family down with him (106). In both cases, even though their initial dreams were imbued with their idealistic view of the world, at the end, their utopian projects by the materialistic that has tainted their American Dream.

South Asian American Men: Lahiri's "Adams"

In "Feminizing Men?: Moving Beyond Asian American Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction," Shankar examines the "pen wars" instigated by Frank Chin and others against the emasculated representations of Chinese men in the works of Chinese American women writers, such as Kingston; she then moves to South Asian writers and explores Lahiri's "unusual" portrayal of Asian American masculinity (139). As Kim maintained in her seminal study of Asian American literature, in most South Asian narratives written by women in the 1960s and 1970s, men played marginal roles, whereas women are the ones who take the active role (70). In the 1980s and 1990s, South Asian women writers like Mukherjee and Divakaruni also depicted women's oppression within both the Indian and (Asian) American contexts (Shankar 137). In contrast, Lahiri's fiction—starting in the late 1990s and up to his most recent publications—avoid the stereotypical images of men as oppressors in a world of arranged marriages. Shankar points out that Lahiri's preference for male narrators in her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), justifying this choice as the writer's attempt to dismantle or move away from earlier paradigms in South Asian American literature. In this way, Shankar argues, Lahiri is able to evince female readers' empathy for the main male characters in her stories (139). As I already argued above, Lahiri differs from Divakaruni, Sara Suleri, Bapsi Sidhwa or even Mukherjee in her approach to a recurrent thematic topos—

where South Asian male characters are the breadwinners, whereas their wives are normally circumscribed to the domestic sphere. Lahiri does not openly condemn any gender discrimination and her narratives do not seem to praise the quest of Asian female characters' liberation. I do not, however, think that Lahiri's intentions are different from the other writers'. Lahiri also criticizes, albeit in a subtle, almost imperceptible way, this unequal gender construction. Lahiri's Asian Adams may seem to be ordinary in the sense that they are neither oppressors nor "invisible," but their acts sometimes suggest that there are some concealed expectations where strict gender roles are still valid.

Lahiri's "Adams," Mr. Sen, Shyamal (Aparna's husband), Pranab (Aparna's lover), and the unnamed narrator-protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent," share the same beginnings in their American adventure. All of them have come to America alone as the American Adam, trying to start up a new life in a new land. As a general rule, they all work at some American university, in Boston, or in the Boston area; afterward, they all bring their spouses to live in America where these (South) Asian women characters normally stay "at home." The scenario is the same in these three stories and even Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, reproduces the same framework. The repetition can seem limiting, but it also allows for many variations on a single basic pattern. From a historical perspective, as examined in the introduction, during the first decades of the twentieth century South Asian immigrants were almost exclusively men; women came to America following their husbands, fathers or brothers. Lahiri's narratives about South Asian immigrants therefore replicate a recurrent pattern in the history of Asian migrations to the United States. The American Dream

was masculine, envisaged by those men who first came to America following a promise that continues to lure the imaginations of immigrants¹¹⁰.

In Lahiri's story entitled "Mrs. Sen's," there is both an emphasis on the woman and an erasure of her identity: we are never told her first name, but is simply introduced as Mr. Sen's wife. Mr. Sen, like many other masculine characters in South Asian narratives written by women, is an "urban middle-class professional" with "breadwinning responsibilities that occupy most of his daily energy" (Zare 101). Mr. Sen conforms to the pattern that Bonnie Zare identifies, which is also a type common to all Lahiri's narratives. However, his peripheral role comes to be essential in defining his wife. He is Mrs. Sen's main motive for being in America. Mr. Sen's "silent" presence in this story replicates Mrs. Sen's own silence and loneliness in an American space where she misses people, community. As I discussed before, critics like Shankar or Navarro Tejero defend the uniqueness of Lahiri's works in the context of narratives written by women because she inaugurates another thematic path where Indian women are not merely the victims of their husbands' oppressions (Navarro 127). However, I do not agree with them in this respect, as the situation Lahiri describes in "Mrs. Sen's" is the cold and almost non-existent relationship between the couple, so that the female character needs to create affective bonds with the boy she baby-sits.

In "The Third and Final Continent," Lahiri repeats the same schema but, in this case, the main character, who is also the first-person narrator, is the unnamed male character. Perhaps, the absence of his name comes from the fact that he personifies the South Asian American man who "pioneers" the new world in search of his dream. He is individualistic, and his life is quite self-centered. The only distraction to his daily routines is the old

¹¹⁰ Conversely, Mukherjee allows Jasmine the chance to look for dream. If in other South Asian American narratives about the Dream, there is a common pattern where the man is the pioneer in America, who brings his wife to America later to live almost exclusively in the domestic sphere. Mukherjee goes further and deliberately repeats the same motif but with a different, surprisingly, ending: this time the South Asian American woman takes her turn in pioneering her Dream.

American landlady who serves as his only company during his first days in America. The male protagonist in “The Third and Final Continent,” as Shankar claims, provokes empathy among the readers, especially in the passages when he retells his daily life, in the episode of his mother’s sickness and death, and in his depiction of his encounters with the American old lady. He is shown to be monetarily worried about his wife’s adaptation to the American context. And yet, once more, he is also portrayed as self-absorbed in his own life and his own experience of the Dream. He resembles the prototypical American Adam, too obsessed with his own self-transformation, striving to achieve a Dream where “Eves” are marginal. However, when the narrator-protagonist of the story introduces Mala to the old woman, there is a change in him; he starts seeing Mala in a different way, recognizing her efforts to adapt to her new marital and geographical situation.

“Hell-Heaven” begins with the same picture of a Bengali family in America. The husband, Shyamal, works at the University and, like Mr. Sen, his voice is practically absent throughout the story, and the few words we hear from him constitute an insensitive attempt to stop Aparna’s complaints: “If you are so unhappy, go back to Calcutta” (76). As the young narrator remarks, Shyamal does not care about his wife, he even does not mind the presence of Pranab—the young male student Aparna is infatuated with—in the house. If we compare Shyamal with Mr. Sen and the male character in “The Third and Final Continent,” we see that their depictions are similar, but Shyamal voices his profound “indifference” towards his wife: she can go back to India, for all he cares. On the other hand, Pranab, Aparna’s “love interest,” is distinct from the other male characters because he evolves throughout the narrative. He marries an American girl and tries to overcome the obvious cultural differences, but his marriage eventually falls apart, as Aparna has predicted. Ironically enough, after this failed marriage, Pranab finally falls in love with a married Bengali woman. Pranab is a pivotal

character in “Hell-Heaven,” as he nurtures Aparna’s actions and dreams. Lahiri portrays a South Asian American Adam who looks for his individual dream and he “destroy[s] two families in the process” (81). His “Adamic” adventure ends in a traditional marriage with another South American woman, affirming the difficulty of breaking out of the ethnic community. Pranab’s American Dream finds it difficult to negotiate his own traditions, the weight of the Bengali community, in a different cultural context.

In “Immigration and Diaspora,” Lim affirms that most South Asian American writings in the last two decades repeat a similar master narrative, evoking the time before coming to America and the problems derived from the differences between their culture and the Anglo-American one (292). I argue that Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, in some ways dismantles and demolishes the pattern that Lim identifies as operating in the major South Asian American narratives. Mukherjee does this by concentrating on Jasmine, a South Asian Eve in America, a woman who never looks back and who is willing to learn what the future holds for her in America. In this context, the Adamic figure also needs to be a peculiar one. In a thematic context where, as Shankar maintains, South Asian men are mostly depicted as oppressors, both in the Asian and American scene (137), Prakash—Jasmine’s Asian American Adam—emerges as the epitome of the modern, enlightened man, who mentors the young Jasmine, and opens her mind to the New World, America, and to the future.

Mukherjee subverts all thematic and gender expectations in *Jasmine*. Paradoxically enough, then, the instigator of Jasmine’s interest in America is her husband, Prakash. She had never thought of America until Prakash showed her pictures of the new land and convinced her of the necessity to go to America: “Listen to me, Jasmine. I want for us to go away and have a real life” (81). At first he seems to fit the pattern of the Bengali man who goes to America to study, bringing his “arranged” wife with him. However, we soon see how Prakash

wants to transmit to Jasmine his belief in the American Dream and in the prospects of a better life in America not only for his own sake, but also for his wife's. In the same way that Jasmine never dwells on her past life, Prakash disdains the weight of Indian traditions concerning women: he refuses to address his wife using a particular pronoun, as "[o]nly in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal" (77). In the same way, Prakash does not want Jasmine to become pregnant at the age of fifteen. Prakash is the one who urges Jasmine to be more "Western" in her attitudes. If Jasmine stands for the new Asian American Eve who, much like the American Adam, builds up her own life and self in her American adventure, Prakash epitomizes the "idea" of the new Asian American Adam who heads for the West in search of a better future. He believes in the American Dream and in the chance of starting a new different life; for Prakash India represents a primitive, undeveloped country where he and Jasmine cannot have high expectations. Mukherjee voices the need to abandon India through Prakash: "I've had it up to here with backward, corrupt, mediocre fools" (81). Unfortunately, Prakash's Dream never comes to realization since he is murdered in India shortly before departure. His killing symbolizes the murder of his dream, an American Dream which was nothing but an "illusion," a "mirage," as Jasmine will recognize later on in the novel¹¹¹.

Prakash's American Dream, which was Jasmine's motivation to go to America, is fatally flawed from the outset, as the "professor" who had persuaded Prakash to come to America turns out to be a fraud: he pretends to work at an American university when he is

¹¹¹ In *The Fiction of South Asians in North America and the Caribbean*, P. Wong, Mitali and Zia Hasan claim that Mukherjee, like Divakaruni, portrays in her narratives "men as losers or antiheroes" (64). Yet Prakash is neither a loser nor an antihero. He is a dreamer who envisions a dream and expectations that vanish with his death, but his dream is the seed Jasmine needs in order to nurture her own dream of America.

really selling hair from Indian women.¹¹² The narrator sarcastically portrays his real job as if it were a big business: “His integrity as a man of science, and as businessman, rested on the absolute guarantee that hair from Dave Vadhera met the highest standards and had been personally selected” (152). However, this fact does not render Jasmine’s idea of the Dream invalid. The discovery of the fraud unleashes Jasmine’s determination to go ahead and continue her journey in America: “A week later, I found myself calling Kate Gordon-Felstein” (153).

We can conclude that, in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee portrays two South Asian Adams whose dreams are just fantasies which will never come true, an authorial decision which I interpret as a subversion the traditional American Dream. On the one hand, Prakash’s dream was an illusion since, as soon he arrived in America he would have realized the lie forged by his mentor. On the other hand, the fake professor, represents the “corrupted” or dark side of the Dream. Like Gatsby in Fitzgerald’s novel or Willy Loman, in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, this “professor” pretends to have an ideal life, he pretends to be someone else in order to prove that his dreams, the American Dream, have not failed him.

Chinese American Men: Kingston’s “Adams”

In *The Woman Warrior* we find two apparently secondary male characters who, despite their brief appearances, are crucial to understanding the Chinese women’s stories.

Thus, Moon Orchid’s husband has a new life in America; in fact, he has a good job at his

¹¹² In Divakaruni’s “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs,” we find a similar masculine character who pretends to be the owner of an automobile empire when he is just a mechanic who works in a dingy garage (44): “Things here aren’t as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we’d become millionaires. But it’s not so easy” (43). Divakaruni’s male protagonist and Mukherjee’s professor are the antiheroes readers expect to encounter in stories about the American Dream, as we have seen, not only in Asian American narratives. Both men pretend to have lived the Dream when they speak to their families in India. See Kumar’s *Passport Photos*.

clinic and has married an American woman. He could epitomize the man who has “made it” in America: a Chinese immigrant who arrives in the new country and becomes a specialized doctor, not just for other Chinese immigrants, but a doctor for “American people.” Thus, he has achieved the vertical mobility implicit in the American Dream; he has been able to forge a prosperous economic future. It also seems he has achieved a “horizontal” mobility into mainstream American society, as he has married a “white” American girl. However, he achieves his dream at the expense of leaving a family behind. He has to forget his Chinese family in order to look for his dream. Moon Orchid’s husband embodies the “rosy” side of the American Dream, while the negative side of his dream is represented by the family he has left in China. Therefore, Moon Orchid and her husband would represent the two faces of the American Dream. Nevertheless, even though the husband embodies the “positive” side, he has also had to pay a price: he has sacrificed his “Chineseness” in order to be successful. The Dream has lured him in such a way he cannot even recognize his own wife. Moon Orchid and his sister-in-law are the “past” for this Adam, or, as he describes them, “people in a book [he] had read a long time ago” (154). Now that he has “embraced” “real” America, he considers these two old Chinese women “history”; they probably just remind him of his past in China, a period he has already forgotten. He embodies the new Chinese American Adam, who is able to start again without looking back. Only when these women visit his clinic does his American Dream turn into a nightmare: his past continues to haunt him in his new life. Nonetheless, Moon Orchid’s husband does not feel any guilt or compassion for his repudiated wife, or nostalgia for the past life which he has consciously renounced in order to have a certain position in mainstream society. Thus, the dark side of the American Dream, the “American Nightmare,” is embodied by what he has lost, that is, his past and, in his past, his wife, Moon Orchid. As Hume maintains, the “nightmare” of the American Dream is the loss

of innocence, and the harm inadvertently caused to others (42). Individual fulfillment, social, political or economic, sometimes entails some personal choice of a new way of life. That choice involves the loss of some aspects of the previous life. Moon Orchid's husband plays the role of the self-made man in America, an "Adam" who has attained a respectable social position; accordingly, since he knows how difficult it is for a Chinese immigrant to gain this social upward mobility, he refuses to give it up when his Chinese wife appears in his life again. As happens with Jasmine, Moon Orchid has a past, another life that, like Jasmine, she wants to forget. Therefore in these texts, we find some subtle change in the traditional idea of the American Adam as a "blank slate." These "new" Adams and Eves have a "dark" past they try to "blank out."

Much has been written about the male characters in *The Woman Warrior*, as well as Kingston's purportedly "ridiculous" portrayal of them. As is well-known, Frank Chin and the other *Aiiieeeee* critics have attacked Kingston's work for what they consider is an inaccurate and sexist depiction of Chinese society. In "Cultural Identity as Spouse," Sāmi Ludwig summarizes Kingston's portrayal of male figures in *The Woman Warrior* as rapists, mentally retarded people or bigamists (106), that is, as allegorical obstacles to the female characters' identity. The relation between the female characters and their masculine "Other," as Ludwig states, is what acknowledges "the issue of cultural attachment" (103). However, there is one male figure in *The Woman Warrior* whom the young Maxine portrays benevolently: her father. He is almost "voiceless" throughout the novel, although the narrator only gives a brief account of his first years the Golden Mountain. He is a Chinese American Adam who, after much struggle, has been able to start up his own laundry, bring his wife over and raise a family. In the following chapter I will deal with the figure of Maxine's father more deeply, as the apparent "silence" that surrounds him "says" a lot not only in *The Woman Warrior*, but

also in her later book *China Men*, where the absent and silent presence of the paternal figure, as well as the uneasy relationship between father and daughter, is pieced together.

3.3. (South) Asian Americans: Silent or Silenced?

In Asian American literature, silence has been a synonym for a stereotypical image of Asian Americans as the model minority, a voiceless, assimilated minority within American mainstream society, stereotypes denounced by Frank Chin and others as “racist.” In a dissertation that aims to rearticulate the traditional American Dream in various contemporary narratives written by (South) Asian women writers, where I argue that the several (South) Asian American Eves depicted in these texts strive, all in different degrees, for their dreams in a context of a gendered and racialized Dream, the trope of silence emerges as a suggestive element. What does silence come to mean for these (South) Asian American Eves?

The masculine bias at the core of the American Dream, at least in its original conception, had entailed collateral damage: the almost invisible role of women in a male Dream. There have been many “silenced” women in autobiographies and fiction written by Asian American women, like Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Fae Myaenne Ng’s *Bone*, or Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (Simal, *Identidad*). To this list I would add some South Asian American narratives where female characters are also significantly “silenced”: Divakaruni’s short stories, Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent,” or Mukherjee’s *Wife* (1992). All these displaced women are the “subalterns” in the shadow of silence: they appear to find no voice to remedy their situation. Furthermore, many of these female characters become deranged or attempt to commit suicide as the last step in their “silencing.”

In her insightful *Articulate Silences* (1993), King-Kok Cheung postulates that silence has manifold “faces” that cannot always be interpreted as meaningless. Sometimes “silence” is not imposed, but symbolizes a response through which the individual chooses to “voice”

her/his disconformity with the reality she/he lives. Following Cheung, Simal distinguishes two types of silence in Asian American narratives in *Identidad étnica y género en la narrativa de escritoras chino-americanas*: an “imposed” silence versus a “reactive” one, the silence forced on them by the traditional and patriarchal social patterns that constrict these immigrant women’s lives in contrast with the chosen silence of those living in-between.

My intention here is to trace “silence” in these narratives in order to discern the actual meaning of the “lack of voice” in these immigrant characters’ voices, both women and men, as well as the significance of these “silences” in the ethnic interpretation of the American Dream.

Silence in *The Woman Warrior*

As is well-known, silence plays a crucial role in *The Woman Warrior* (Cheung, Simal). Kingston’s book opens with the following advice Kingston receives from her mother: “You must not tell anyone” (3). This advice anticipates the significance of “silence” for the young narrator. In this first section of the book, Maxine learns of the “no-name” woman tale, the story of her aunt, whose name has been forgotten, erased, left unpronounced: “In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt’s name; I do not know it. . . . The real punishment was . . . the family’s deliberately forgetting her” (16). Oblivion is imposed on both the narrator and her anonymous aunt: this no-name woman is silenced by the traditional patriarchal mores which also force the young Maxine to participate in her aunt’s punishment. The “no-name woman” is tortured by her family and neighbors for being unfaithful to a husband who has abandoned her¹¹³. Women, in both Western and

¹¹³ Suzette A. Henke proposes a reading of the no-name woman as antithetical to Moon Orchid, as the latter chooses to remain faithful to her adulterous husband who finally rejects her (220).

Chinese traditions, have historically suffered the prejudices of rigid social constructs and gender divisions which relegate them to a silenced and passive position. As Simal reminds us, in traditional China, the image of the silent woman—opposed to a woman who can openly express her ideas, either speaking or writing—was praised. But, this image of silence was equally respected and admired in Western traditions, where the same type of symbolic “castration” occurred. In the case of Maxine, when her mother urges her not to tell the story of her no-name aunt, she is also undergoing an imposed silence, though Maxine turns this silence into words, with which she rewrites the oral fable of the no-name woman: “I alone devote pages of paper to her. . . . I am telling on her” (16). Maxine’s words represent a treason against her family’s tradition of silence, a practice she cannot understand. Cheung observes the dramatic change that “silence” undergoes in *The Woman Warrior*, as the initial—imposed—silence becomes a “barbarian” song, the Reed Pipe song, which the Chinese have learnt to “sing to their own instruments” (209). Thus silence and secretiveness vanish at the end of the novel.

In spite of the multiple feminine voices represented in the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, as Simal argues, there is a common bond among them: silence, a silence that will become sound at the end of the book, as a metaphor for the women’s stories which this book retells: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (184). In the same way, the young narrator evidences some change in the story she is telling, as Maxine herself evolves throughout the narrative, and goes from an “imposed” silence to a “reactive” one, following Simal’s thesis. Maxine deliberately chooses to be silent during “the three years that I covered my school paintings in black” (165). Brave Orchid, her mother, following traditional practice, cuts Maxine’s frenum to allow her tongue “to move in any

language” (164), but Simal interprets this action as an image of the traditional patriarchal society which intended to “cut” women’s voice, so that, in her interpretation, Brave Orchid supports this masculine and patriarchal tradition. The young Maxine associates those three years of silence with the black paintings she used to draw, expressing the dark period Maxine went through due to her inability to speak. Furthermore, Maxine declares how her sister was also silent: “My sister also said nothing for three years, silent in the playground and silent at lunch. There were other quiet Chinese girls not of our family, but most of them got over it sooner than we did. I enjoyed silence” (166). The young narrator identifies being “silent” with being a Chinese girl, and she declares she cannot endure that “misery,” she needs to speak out. Linda Morante claims that, in *The Woman Warrior*, words and the ability to pronounce them are related to survival, whereas silence “obliterates identity” (78). I argue, following Cheung’s premises, that silence does not necessarily erase identity in *The Woman Warrior*: silence allows the young narrator to “adapt” and to find her identity. The whole book is about the young Maxine’s attempts to find a place in her entangled situation of living between two cultures. She rejects her parents’ heritage, but she also refuses American “ghostly” existence: “Sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. ‘Don’t tell’” (183). Maxine is in between two worlds, two cultures, and consequently, she stumbles and “stammers” in that in-between position. The grown-up Maxine even continues to fall prey to a “dumbness” that “cracks [her] voice in two” (148).

The passage where Maxine gets furious at the quiet Chinese girl and “tortures” her, urging her to “speak up loudly,” symbolizes Maxine’s anger with the “mutism” typically ascribed to Chinese women. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong reads this episode as an example of the “doppelgänger” motif (86). Maxine and the Chinese girl are not so different from each other,

as Wong argues, their difference lies in their degree of assimilation to the American culture (88). Maxine's ability to speak makes her feel more assimilated than the quiet girl, her "double" or, in Wong's terms, her "racial shadow." By harassing and urging the girl to speak, Maxine is articulating tries to disown a feeling of "racial" inferiority.

Malini Johar Schueller maintains that "what constitutes female experience is not biological gender or a specific female psyche but the constraints and limitations felt by women as a result of the cultural constitution of gender and the phallogocentric organization of society" (52). There is one scene in "At the Western Palace," where Brave Orchid remains voiceless and stunned when she sees that she can do nothing to save her sister's marriage which, in my opinion, confirms Schueller's intuitions. Brave Orchid, the brave, the warrior, becomes silent when she realizes that her own and her sister's voices could never be heard, that the "laws" which she thought forbade the adulterous behavior of Moon Orchid's husband do not exist. This episode is very significant because we are not used to seeing Brave Orchid in a "silenced" position. She has always fought and stood up for her ideas. However, here we see a different Brave Orchid, not so outspoken, as she realizes her sister's inability to confront a new life in America by herself.

The conclusions Maxine reaches about silence are embedded in these lines: "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves" (186). Silence and madness are two issues that are often interrelated, not only in the tradition of Western narratives and their "madwomen in the attic," but also, as Cheung and Xiao-huang Yin declare, in Asian and Asian American literary works. Sheng-mei Ma interestingly maintains that there is a proliferation of works where Asian immigrants are represented as schizophrenic. Ma quotes Ronald David Lain's reinterpretation of schizophrenia as a "normal response to a world of alienation and

madness” (44), whereby such insanity can be regarded a consequence or a response to the “dislocated” situation immigrants experience in America. As I will discuss later on, some of the female immigrant characters studied here are depicted as insane or exhibiting an unusual silence, which can be interpreted as a sign of some psychological disorder. Actually, the young Maxine suggests that “every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl” (189), internalizing the traditional link between dislocated women and madness.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston portrays some “silenced” women who the young narrator sees as negative role models in her attempt to abandon her early silence. Though it seems contradictory, Maxine evokes these silent women as her way to “exorcize” silence out of her body and mind. She does not want to be a “loser,” like the little Chinese girl in her school, though paradoxically enough, this tortured girl would live a happy life as an adult. The young Maxine aims to be brave and she needs to retell these forbidden stories about silenced women in order always to keep in mind what she must avoid, to stop becoming another silent woman. By conjuring up stories about other female silences in her family, Maxine exorcises her own fears that she may replicate those lives.

Apart from the no-name aunt, Maxine frequently evokes another ghost who haunts her: her aunt Moon Orchid. As her own name suggests, Moon Orchid is a delicate, fragile and sensitive person. After her “shock of arrival” in America, she tries to understand American life. She knows many things about the “Gold Mountain,” like the rest of the Chinese immigrants, but she does not know what the “real America” is like: “So this is the United States [. . .] It certainly looks different from China. I’m glad to see the Americans talk like us” (136). Brave Orchid answers: “These aren’t Americans. These are the overseas Chinese” (136). Moon Orchid is the displaced woman who will keep feeling the “shock of arrival” during the rest of her life in America. The tragicomic episode when she finally

confronts her unfaithful husband traumatizes her for the rest of her life. This episode is especially relevant not only because Brave Orchid remains voiceless for most of the passage, but also because this scene will be the last one were Moon Orchid shows some rational behavior. Significantly, the only words Moon Orchid says when her husband reprimands her, assuring her that she does not belong in America, are: “What about me?” (153). Moon Orchid’s lack of words represents her lack of power to tell her husband that his decision to abandon her is unfair. The scene when Moon Orchid finally meets her lost husband is both ludicrous and pathetic, especially after her husband tells her the harsh truth: “You can’t belong. You don’t have the hardiness for this country. I have a new life. . . . I’m living like an American” (153). He refuses to let her take part in his new American life, downgrading her to a mere object that he can turn down at any moment. Their past together is not important any more, and Moon Orchid has to face a new life in America, one that she must live in loneliness. In Moon Orchid, Kingston shows us a weak woman, unable to understand her new situation, a woman who ends up psychically deranged and once more alone.

Sidonie Smith claims that Moon Orchid is a woman “without biography” (19), without a voice to speak her mind and confront her husband. After meeting him again in America, Moon Orchid never speaks sense again: “Deprived of her homeland, her marriage, her identity, and her illusions, the pathetic old woman [Moon Orchid] falls into vertigo, then paranoia” (Henke 221). Thus, Moon Orchid’s insanity could be conceived as the consequence of her loneliness. According to Lain’s hypothesis on schizophrenia, Moon Orchid’s insanity would then constitute her reaction to being alienated by her husband in a “foreign” land. Xiao-huang Yin maintains that Kingston gives a new “dimension” to her “crazy women” when she “present[s] women as [both] victims and victors” (231). This opposition Yin postulates coincides with the antagonism between the two sisters’ roles in this story, with

Moon Orchid's being the victim, the mad woman, the displaced person. Nevertheless, as I discussed above, I argue that Brave Orchid, though she has been usually typified as the brave one, is not essentially the victorious one either, in Yin's terms. The sisters' journey to Los Angeles to confront Moon Orchid's husband epitomizes Brave Orchid's minimal awareness of the real world and how this world works, the limits of her understanding.

In their seminal *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar recognize the existence of a pattern in the literature of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where many "mad women" are confined to their attics as a concomitant response to a masculine and patriarchal society.¹¹⁴ Moon Orchid is not so unlike those nineteenth-century "non-ethnic" female characters. As Gilbert and Gubar affirm, the "madwoman" is "an emblem of 'speechless woe' as she has 'no voice to speak her dread'" (77). Like many of these nineteenth-century heroines, Moon Orchid is silenced by the figure of her husband, and her fears of losing and disappointing him: "But she had never told him that she wanted to come to the United States. She waited for him to suggest it" (124). Moon Orchid's life is enclosed in "the architecture of and overwhelming male-dominated society" (Gilbert and Gubar xi). Her life has been "stolen" during all those years she has been waiting for him in Hong Kong. Now that she has finally confronted him, he forces her to "disappear" again. Moon Orchid's symbolic "attic" before coming to America is China and, afterwards, the mental asylum. Like Brontë's Lucy Snowe in *Villette* or *Jane Eyre*'s "madwoman in the attic," Mrs Rochester, Moon Orchid will be deprived of her "will to live," which will lead her to her death in life. Another important image that reinforces my argument of connecting Moon Orchid with those "mad women in the attics" is her obviously portrayal as "lunatic," as confirmed by her name.

114 An earliest example of the "madwoman in the attic," would be Mrs. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, a Creole woman from the Caribbean, married off and displaced in England. In 1966 Jean Rhys wrote a novel about that unnamed Mrs. Rochester.

In the same way that Gilbert and Gubar maintain that there is a dichotomy in British and American nineteenth-century literature between the “lady who submits to male dicta and the ‘lunatic’ who rebels” (86), Moon Orchid seems to adjust to both positions. First, she is the lady who patiently waits for her husband in China, however, as soon as she reappears in his life, rebelling against his wishes, Moon Orchid becomes demented, lunatic. Moon Orchid is not depicted as a rebel, and Kingston underlines this with innumerable lines alluding to Moon Orchid’s passivity and delicateness, but her “lunatic” nature, which in the nineteenth century literature would be presented as “genuinely feminine,” constructs her as an Asian American version of the “madwoman in the attic.”

Moon Orchid’s dislocated position in America renders her “subaltern.” As someone “who is neither prepared to fight for justice in the United States, nor able to endure the inhuman working conditions in a Chinese-American laundry,” Moon Orchid can be said to embody subalternity (Shu 216). This silenced/voiceless woman lives “in shadow,” in a mental asylum away from her family. Moon Orchid is marginalized not only by being the postcolonial “Other” but also, as Spivak contends, by being a woman: “[t]he subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (28). Moon Orchid’s inability to adapt to America’s mainstream social schemes and speak for herself leads her to madness. In interpreting Moon Orchid as a “subaltern,” Shu recalls that Spivak’s subaltern is a woman from the Third World who is muted in a capitalistic world, but Moon Orchid is also a subaltern because she is caught “between tradition and modernization” (Spivak 306). Furthermore, Moon Orchid was probably already silenced back in China, where she was living a lie there. After coming to America, the paragon of the “modern and capitalist world,” Moon Orchid feels dislocated and, additionally, her husband’s repudiation forces her to remain “mute” as well. As Didur and Heffernan state, the “new subaltern” symbolizes the individual trapped between “global

capitalism/development and tradition/culturalism” (4). Therefore, Moon Orchid can be construed as the embodiment of the new subaltern, because she is caught between America—incarnated by husband’s capitalistic dream—and tradition—her past, her “Chineseness,” which does not “fit” in her husband’s America. Moon Orchid is as much the archetypal American Eve as the subaltern whose life has always been determined by someone else. Now in America, Moon Orchid needs her sister’s Dream to reaffirm her “self.”

Moon Orchid incarnates innocence, the blank slate. The blank slate theory claims that the human mind is a “*tabula rasa*” when it is born, and it will later become complex by merely absorbing the world around. The American Dream holds that the individual, free from the “sins” of the old world, is able to start again in America, and this fresh start entails a second “blank slate.” “Innocence” is inherent in the blank slate doctrine; hence, it is incorporated deeply in the American Dream, in the myth of the American Adam, as I argued in the introductory chapters. Moon Orchid can thus be construed as a Chinese American Eve, as innocent in her “coming” to America as the traditional American Adam was. Steven Pinker relates the “blank slate” doctrine to Rousseau’s theory of the “noble savage,” which defends the original state of innocence and virtue in the human being before meeting “corrupted” civilization (Pinker 6; Elligson 1). Moon Orchid is innocent but she is not the epitome of “the noble savage,” though: her coming from China, and from the old civilization it represents, prevents her from being construed as a “noble savage.” At the same time, her innocence is almost childish, as Simal suggests in *Identidad étnica y género*, to the point that her sister suspects that Moon Orchid is somehow “dense” (41). The passage where the narrator recounts how Moon Orchid observes Brave Orchid’s children shows certain weird behavior, behavior expected of a child watching life for the first time, but not so much of an adult woman. Brave Orchid even encourages her sister to put her things away, as if she were a girl

playing with her dolls and afterwards she would not clean up (121). The relationship between both sisters is more reminiscent in some ways of the relation between a mother and her little daughter than a sisterly relationship. Brave Orchid not only shows her sister the new world, but explains it to her and helps her in her journey of “discovery.” Although Moon Orchid does not embody the idea of the “noble savage,” as I mentioned above, she is nonetheless a “blank slate” in America, like the “Eve” she personifies, observing a new world in front of her eyes and at the same time refusing to go back to her past, her husband. When Moon Orchid meets her “corrupted” husband, she loses her innocence and cannot endure living in “sinful” America.

In Moon Orchid Kingston intertwines silence with madness, as Brave Orchid reminds her children that madness becomes evident when a person cannot speak logically: “The difference between mad people and sane people . . . is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (159). This repetition becomes a form of the silence that has also obliterated other women in *The Woman Warrior*, such as the no-name aunt or the Chinese little girl in Maxine’s school. Kingston makes these women “invisible,” as Simal suggests, victims of the social constructs and constraints, victims of their own lives. Moon Orchid’s final days haunt Brave Orchid, as she tries to find an explanation for her sister’s sickness. Language plays a crucial role in Moon Orchid’s illness, as she can talk, but just says the same disconnected words again and again, depriving them of meaning or even presence: “Don’t go. The planes. Ashes. Washington, D.C. Ashes” (159). Moon Orchid’s “invisible” life reaches its ultimate stage in a dementia

that will “silence” her for the rest of her life. The failure of her quest is also the collapse of the American Dream, not only for Moon Orchid, but also for her sister as witness¹¹⁵.

Silence in Lahiri’s Eyes

As I argued in the introduction to this chapter, there are many examples of silenced/silent women in contemporary Asian American narratives. In scrutinizing the trope of silence, I do not want to suggest that these South Asian female characters are simply oppressed and forced to remain silent; their silences, as Cheung argues, convey a variety of nuances.

Mrs. Sen, for one, seems to personify a “silenced” woman who lives behind her husband’s name. Her failed attempt to participate in mainstream society—exemplified by the car crash she has when she is trying to drive on her own—leads Mrs. Sen to isolate herself in her bedroom where she locks the door and remains silent, and isolated from the world outside. She is, as Smith proposes, another (South) Asian woman without an [auto]biography, like Mala, Aparna or many other female characters in South Asian immigrant narratives. Nevertheless, some information about Mrs. Sen’s life in India is given in her conversations with Eliot. The third-person narrator focuses on Mrs. Sen’s days at home, describing how she cooks and prepares the food in the Bengali way, always trying to buy the best fresh fish. Mrs. Sen’s place is the kitchen, within the house where she lives ostracized from the world outside. However, Lahiri allows her to have some company: the young Eliot. And yet, Mrs. Sen’s relationship with Eliot is almost exclusively confined to the space of the house, as the advertisement that Mrs. Sen put in the supermarket clearly details: “I will care for your child

¹¹⁵ Moon Orchid’s silence can further symbolize the silence that generations of minorities have undergone in America, specially Chinese immigrants, usually stereotyped as the “submissive, and obedient ‘model minority’” (Duncan 216; cf. Simal, *Identidad*). See the section devoted to Asian American Adams, in chapter 3.3.

in my home” (111). Mrs. Sen cannot drive and, in a car-dependent society, she cannot break through her isolation from the world outside. After the episode of the car crash, Mrs. Sen locks herself in her room. It is the last time she appears in the story. As a consequence of the car crash, Eliot’s mother decides to stop hiring Mrs. Sen as a babysitter. Thus, the story finishes with Mrs. Sen alone in her home again, thus reinforcing her loneliness and silence.

Lahiri not only isolates this immigrant woman, however, she also confines young Eliot, the American character, to the loneliness of his own life with his mother. Susan Muchshima Moynihan (104) draws attention to the fact that the story is told from Eliot’s point of view, which lays the ground for a comparison between his and his mother’s lonely life, on the one hand, and Mrs. Sen’s, on the other: “He also knew she [his mother] didn’t eat lunch at work. . . . She sat at the table as he ate, drinking more wine . . . but eventually she went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers” (Lahiri 118). The three of them, Eliot, his mother and Mrs. Sen, sit alone eating, almost without talking, just because being there creates some kind of company that helps them in their loneliness. Eliot’s mother decides that he is old enough now to stay without a babysitter. At first we might think that he is going to enjoy more of his mother’s company, but at the end we see the loneliness of this character: “Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine” (135). There is nobody there to talk to, just silence, and the “grayness” of a solitary existence.

It has become obvious, therefore, that, when Lahiri tackles the theme of loneliness, she does not focus just on the immigrant woman character. Is this a postmodern malaise, then? In *Indian Women Writing in English*, C.V.B.T. Sundari contends that Lahiri can be best understood from a postmodern feminist perspective, as the writer focuses on discerning the role of women in society “striving for their betterment as a whole, which is in sharp contrast

to the rebellious modern feminism which was popular in the 60s and 70s” (169). Thus, in her short stories Lahiri deconstructs binary oppositions such as the South Asian immigrant woman versus the American woman, presenting both women as sharing the same conflicts and maladies. Lahiri unsettles traditional binaries because she is not interested in merely “denouncing” certain situations that immigrants face in America; she widens the theme of loneliness to include both immigrant and non-immigrant characters. Though I agree that in her narratives Lahiri always tries to keep a “balanced” position between South Asian immigrants and “standard” American characters, I argue that she implicitly addresses issues such as race, the clash of cultures and social and gender constructs in both South Asian and American societies. True enough, the loneliness of Eliot’s mother, even though she plays a secondary role in the story, remains significant. She prefers to stay silent, simply crying over her failure as a mother. Since she does not even know her son well, she cannot give Eliot the emotional support that Mrs. Sen, a stranger, apparently can. Nevertheless, both “nameless” women, Eliot’s mother and Mrs. Sen, show feelings that are not that different: both experience and express the same feeling of loneliness.

It can be said Lahiri confirms the most widespread stereotypes at the beginning of the story, where the American woman, a single mother, is introduced as a self-confident, commanding and demanding woman in contrast with the immigrant, Mrs. Sen, and her quietness and guarded attitude. Apparently, Mrs. Sen only relaxes when she hears the word “India”:

The mention of the word [India] seemed to release something in her. She neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest. She, too, looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. (113)

For Gita Rajan, Lahiri bypasses specific “racial,” immigrant issues by avoiding addressing those problems. I would argue that Lahiri does tackle the cross-cultural conflict here through a subtle, indirect approach, that is, Lahiri presents two different women, one South Asian and the other American, who, at the end, seem not to be so different as they both feel loneliness in America. Thus, although at first sight Lahiri does not tackle cultural/racial issues, I contend that, on second reading, one can discern an oblique critique of Eliot’s mother and what she signifies. Mrs. Sen’s own past, culture and arrival in America shape her feelings that are, as the narrator suggests, at variance with those of the American woman, whose loneliness is not depicted as a consequence of her past, but of a life spent without paying enough attention to what she has at home. Whereas Mrs. Sen misses family and “home,” Eliot’s mother does not know the meaning of family; she just provides what she thinks is better for her son without considering that there is an affective element inherent in any parental relationship. Shankar is right to point out a recurrent pattern in South Asian American women’s narratives of the theme of “loneliness.” However, Lahiri introduces a twist in this thematic topos by creating the equivalent situation that Mrs. Sen’s is undergoing in the American characters, Eliot and his mother. She dismantles the stereotypes and disrupts patterns present in South Asian American literature by presenting two female characters who share a common feeling of solitude in America. In refusing to focus exclusively on the South Asian immigrant, and in exploring—though in an oblique way—the dilemmas faced by non-racialized American characters, she avoids any simplistic stereotyping.

Mrs. Sen’s silence is both “imposed” and “reactive,” following Simal’s thesis. Mrs. Sen has to be silent as she cannot live in America, a country so different from “her” India. It is also a “reactive” one, because when Mrs. Sen closes her room’s door she is closing her

“self” to the new context, to a new life.¹¹⁶ Mrs. Sen, like Moon Orchid, cannot understand the reality that surrounds her. She feels outraged and disappointed. The final passage, when she chucks into the garbage the blade she had brought from India for preparing food and vegetables, and proceeds to make a “plate of crackers with peanut butter” instead (134), symbolizes Mrs. Sen’s final collapse in America. Food, which comes to be an important trope in immigrant stories, represents for Mrs. Sen her connection to India. When she gets rid of the blade, she is denying her Bengali past, her culture, the only bond she has managed to keep in the American domestic space. Now she prepares a “typical” American dish: crackers and peanut butter. Mrs. Sen has surrendered to America, but this surrender cannot be interpreted in positive terms, as her ultimate isolation in her room shows. Now that she has nobody to share her feelings with, there is no point in keeping her memories from the past. She will silence them in her loneliness.

Paula Gunn Allen affirms that immigrants living between cultures are prone to be “inarticulate, almost paralyzed in their ability to direct their energies toward resolving what seems to them an insoluble conflict. Their lives are, as they see it, completely beyond their control and any hope of reconciling the oppositions within and outside themselves seems beyond their reach” (135). Allen’s analysis aptly describes those of Lahiri’s female characters studied here. All of them are “caught” in the middle of two cultures, two worlds, and their answer to their feeling of “in-betweenness” is silence. Allen’s statement somehow contradicts Anzaldúa’s celebration of that “in-betweenness.” For Anzaldúa, living between two or more cultures enriches individuals and the cultures themselves, as new perspectives and identities can be created in this space. However, Mrs. Sen’s attitude towards this “in-betweenness” is not that positive, as she is not able to embrace her new liminal situation and the

116 See also Divakaruni’s short story “Doors,” where, as the title suggests, closed doors isolate the female protagonist from a reality she is not able to confront (See Simal 2004).

transformative prospects inherent in this new space. Lahiri depicts the drama of this woman living between two cultures, for whom the everyday act of driving a car, something unthinkable for a wealthy woman in India, becomes a nightmare.¹¹⁷ After the crash, she cannot articulate her feelings. Her life becomes aimless as she cannot find her place in her American life. Similarly, in Lahiri's "Hell-Heaven," when Aparna realizes how "fictitious" the imaginary affair with Pranab had been, at the end of the story, she is also depicted as "paralyzed," echoing Allen's terms. Mrs. Sen's and Aparna's attempts to abandon the safety of their routines, their life at home, by driving a car or meeting another man, respectively, only lead them to despair, as they realize how difficult their lives in America are.

Lahiri's narratives can be misread as an implicit call for women to stay within the domestic sphere, performing domestic tasks without ever stepping out into the outside world, America. However, this is an oblique attack of Indian traditions. The "happy endings" many authors have seen in Lahiri's fiction are not supposed to be happy. As I discussed previously, there is always an implicit critique in Lahiri's stories. In Aparna's case, the final act of obliteration is represented by her attempt to commit suicide, when she finds out that Pranab is marrying a second wife. Silence fills the scene, as Aparna stands alone, in the backyard, unable to go ahead with her suicidal plan: "For nearly an hour she stood there, looking at our house" (83), the daughter-narrator relates. The neighbor who "helps" her does not even notice what Aparna's intentions are. Silence, once more, makes Aparna's life invisible and non-existent, in the same way that it has made her love for Pranab disappear, as if it had just existed in her dreams. Unfortunately, her dream proves to be just that, a dream,

117 In addition to the groups created on the basis of differences in terms of religion, caste and language, there is also a class system in India. The upper class in India consists of wealthy people and millionaires. The opposite extreme would be made up of the millions of poor people who live in slums. In *Teaching Social Studies in India*, P.K. Khasnavis points out the big differences between upper and lower classes, in a country where the wealthy people can afford uncommon luxuries (49): the upper classes do not clean, do not cook; they have many servants to do the housework and, what Mrs. Sen longs for, to drive them around.

and her “real” life seems to continue, as the narrator suggests, as “silent” and “silenced” as it has always been. Thus, to a certain extent, Mrs. Sen and Aparna do not differ from Divakaruni’s female characters in *Arranged Marriage*, who also silently try to live their new lives in their diasporas (Shankar 137). Once again, as I discussed previously, we can see that Lahiri’s fiction is not so mild and superficial as Shankar and Rajan have claimed. I argue that, by reading between the lines, one can see how Lahiri condemns both American society and Indian traditions for making life so difficult for these characters.

For Navarro Tejero, Lahiri does not portray Indian women as victims of the burden that Indian traditions convey (127), and it is true that Mrs. Sen and Aparna, like Mala in “The Third and Final Continent,” foster the memory of Bengali traditions at home and in their children, trying to maintain them in this new context; yet, the silences that surround these women’s lives suggest that something has been lost in their “translation” from their Bengali past into their American present. In Mrs. Sen’s case, her silence emphasizes her inability to adapt, to adjust her memories to her present life; Aparna’s miserable life is only brightened by the presence of Pranab, and when he disappears from her life, her illusions and dreams fade away; Mala’s life is almost invisible until her husband realizes how much she has sacrificed for him and their new life in a different continent. Therefore, these three South Asian American Eves differ from similar characters in the fact that they do not convey any view of immigration as “celebratory,” as Navarro Tejero points out (133). On the contrary, these texts present immigration as a long path these women need to walk, and in order to understand their silences it is necessary to see those moments in their lives when their dreams and memories come to grips with their reality.

Silence in *Jasmine*

Mukherjee's life changes during the 1980s are reflected in the author's writing career, according to critics like Victoria Sullivan. In Mukherjee's later fiction, characters become more participative and they leave behind their status of mere "observers" in the personal process of "self-transformation" (267). *Jasmine* epitomizes the turning point in Mukherjee's literary trajectory, as the eponymous protagonist challenges the traditional structures by being the motive force of her own transformation in America. Hence, she personifies the opposite of a "silent" woman, as Sullivan claims; however, this critic fails to take account of how *Jasmine* is also, through her multiple "selves," a "secretive" character.

Jasmine's first-person narrator reveals some gloomy episodes in *Jasmine*'s life that she keeps hidden from her partners. Mukherjee employs a fragmented structure with profuse flashbacks to those moments that *Jasmine* keeps secret, episodes that will remain "silent" and hidden from the people she meets in her process of self-transformation. As Sandra Ponzanesi maintains, *Jasmine*'s "interplay between the diegesis (past) and the narration (present)," two time periods that are distant from each other but connected in the narrator's story and mind, can be interpreted as the distance and interplay between the past culture and the present one (36). I argue that this crisscrossing of past and present also contributes to emphasize those silences "in between" that the narrator wants to keep concealed, unexpressed; these are the silences involved in *Jasmine*'s transforming process, the silences underlying her multiple names. When living in Flushing, a period when *Jasmine* feels confined, she silently locks herself in the bathroom and starts crying, as she feels that "[a]n imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was a

prisoner doing unreal time” (148). The figurative language in this passage stresses Jasmine’s feelings of being a prisoner in an unreal world. For Jasmine, the Flushing apartment represents an unreal Indian space where she cannot live her dream, and time and space seem to be as fictitious as the fake professor. Jasmine cannot continue living his lie, being a prisoner of a past she has already rejected. Doors again emerge as a significant symbol for closure, silence.

Jasmine needs to keep quiet about certain events of her life in order to continue the quest for her particular American Dream. Therefore, Jasmine’s silence differs from Moon Orchid’s, because the former actively struggles with the obstacles she meets in her arduous “journey.” Indeed, Jasmine ultimately rejects being confined to “nothingness.” The episode when Jasmine leaves Bud Ripplemeyer, the father of her soon-to-be-born baby, “dreaming of” a different, better life, symbolizes her refusal to continue being “silenced” in the traditional society that Iowa represents for her. Jasmine wants “adventure, risk, transformation” (240), aspirations that Bud cannot offer her. As Carl Jenkinson argues, “marriage [represents] a hindrance if not a barrier to female self-liberation” (80) that threatens to clip Jasmine’s wings. When Bud asks her to marry him, she thinks of the “past” that Bud does not know about: her first marriage with Prakash. That terribly truncated marriage had also “silenced” Jasmine in some ways, as some parts of her “self” and her past needed to be rejected in order for her to become the woman that Prakash- Pygmalion intended her to be: “Prakash has taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash” (97). Like Ovid’s Pygmalion, Prakash marries Jyoti and creates a new woman, named Jasmine, “a new kind of city woman” (70). The metamorphosis embedded in the Pygmalion myth itself involves a past and a present and many silences in between. In *Jasmine* there is an unceasing process of transformation where old identities

disappear, prompting a progression towards new subjectivities and selves. Unburdening herself of those identities and selves involves silence; silencing the past is what allows the protagonist to move forward and attain her dream. We can conclude that silence in *Jasmine* is powerfully meaningful, and meaningfully powerful.

Silence in *Typical American*

Lee's "Failed Performances of the Nation in Gish Jen's *Typical American*" (2000) addresses the significance of Helen and Theresa's "silent" presence in the gendered American Dream narrative of *Typical American*. Lee argues that Helen and Theresa often "halt" the rhythm of a story where both women are secondary to Ralph's Dream. Lee reads Jen's feminine interruptions as Helen and Theresa's choice to subvert Ralph's patriarchal pattern. However, Lee is too prescriptive in her thinking when she states that Helen and Theresa do not embody the role of "heroines" in *Typical American*. Both characters are "silent" brave women who confront Ralph's gendered and traditional mind, albeit in a quiet way. As Cheung has argued, "silence" cannot be interpreted exclusively as signifying "passivity," "inaction," otherwise we would be acknowledging a gendered and "logocentric" judgement (*Articulate Silences* 1). Therefore, these Eves' silences can be read as instrumental in prevented Ralph's biased version of the American Dream. The last scene of *Typical American*, when Ralph's finally claims "America was no America" (296), represents Ralph's realization of "his" egoistic and self-centered Dream, a Dream that excluded both Helen and Theresa. If as Lee maintains in her article, Asian American women's silence helps to construct the Asian American home and domestic tranquility (50), Ralph's patriarchal household is really ruled by Helen. As the narrator professes, "Helen is Home": Helen has

become the center of the household despite Ralph's attempt to reign over the house. The image of the house is relevant everywhere in the novel, to the extent that it embodies and materializes Ralph's Dream, which, as I discussed before, merges Confucian principles with the Founding Fathers' premises. Ralph sees himself as the patriarch of the house, but, in actual fact, he will be the one who makes the house "tremble," as the literal pillars of his household fall apart because of his greed. Silences disguise what cannot be told: "In their household . . . silence has teeth. . . . Ralph looked to see what the women meant" (135). Theresa and Helen's silences articulate their need to participate in the dream Ralph has envisaged for himself, and they also underscore the fact that Ralph's dream is falling apart. Silence emerges in Helen and Theresa's relationship with Ralph.

When Theresa leaves Ralph's house and confines herself to a small apartment where she spends her days alone, with nobody to speak to, the narrator emphasizes what Theresa feels on entering her new apartment and being alone for her first time in America: "The room lost light, slowly. And then there was nothing to do but stand up, and feel for a switch, and unpack" (212). Theresa was alone again, as when she came to America before Ralph. The four "bare walls" of Theresa's apartment, with a "metal bed in the corner," and its "mist gray" "linoleum floor," emphasize the grayness, coldness and inhospitableness that isolation as well as the silence that comes to surface (211). Thus, the "silence" Theresa forces in the Changs familiar life and routine constitutes, as Lee suggests, a pause in the narrative that can be read as Jen's denouncing of Theresa's situation in Ralph's patriarchal household and his masculinist conception of the Dream¹¹⁸. In the same way, Cheung's view of "silence" in Asian American literature coincides with Theresa's silence; her silence is not equated with

¹¹⁸ In the passage cited above, Theresa's silence in her new apartment is only broken by the neighbor's "flushing of the toilet," and then by the "dying groan—the sink" (211). Once more, Jen uses her characteristic humorous tone that breaks the "solemnity" of this scene where Theresa is immersed in her own fight against conventions.

passivity or inaction, thus helping to unsettle the “Eurocentric perspective on speech and silence,” where women are the silent, passive ones (Cheung 23). Theresa’s choice to “silently disappear” from Ralph’s life is her way of fighting against Ralph’s Confucian and masculinist conception that leads his life and his American Dream..

In a different way, Helen and Grover’s affair is marked by the silence and secrecy that an affair implies, a silence that has teeth, a silence that Ralph can feel in his household but whose source or meaning he cannot yet discern. This image represents the “fragmented,” “unfriendly,” “inhospitable” household, itself a reflection of Ralph’s Dream. Consequently, in the same way that Ralph’s Dream collapses, his house finally falls apart, together with all its inhabitants.

Thus, the “silence” in these Chinese American Eves becomes a mechanism that Jen paradoxically employs to make them heard, while, at the same time, it expresses the drama of living under rigid patriarchal conventions. Helen is depicted from the beginning as a “quiet” woman, who, in contrast with Theresa, has been raised to become a perfect wife. In the first chapters, even the relationship between Helen and Theresa is characterized as “voiceless”: “Her [Theresa’s] relationship with Helen had always depended on silence” (79). Their silence is a silence of “restraint” (79), a constrained silence between two women who share the same task of helping Ralph fulfill his dream, but always from an “invisible” position. Throughout the novel, though, there is a visible progression in the female characters’ relation: they become closer in order to survive in Ralph’s household. When Helen reaffirms herself as the center of the household, she urges Theresa to come back in spite of Ralph’s decision not to talk to his sister any more. As the story advances, both women will fall in love with different men, engaging in equally forbidden affairs behind Ralph’s back, defying the patriarch of the house. Thus, Helen and Theresa share the silence that hushes their prohibited hidden loves.

Here, the connection between “silence” and “secrecy” becomes conspicuous: silence is an inherent component of secrets as something always remains unsaid.

In *American Secrets* (2011), José Liste-Noya explores the “secrecy” embedded in the idea of America itself, proposing a reading that goes beyond the “logical sense” hidden in many American literary and cultural manifestations (12). Liste-Noya claims that America is founded on secrecy: “the secret of America would seem to lie in its very lack of secrecy, in the democratic transparency of its political and social environment and its promise of open-ended possibility for all” (2). I want to connect Liste-Noya’s idea of secrecy with the silence that pervade these texts’ negotiation of the America Dream, as silence constitutes an obvious and essential component of any secret. Helen and Theresa’s secrets hide their “silenced” real identities, their real hopes in America. As a satire of traditional patterns of American behavior, the silence in *Typical American* represents the silent position of Eves in the myth of the American Dream. Helen and Theresa’s hopes and dreams must be kept secret, since they are unacceptable, taboo. Helen and Theresa’s secrets shape the history of America and its Dream, a Dream that promulgates a “fantasy” of equality and instead prefers silence, the “silences” in those letters the immigrants write back home. As Lee contends, Ralph’s story of success exposes “the underside of quest narratives,” where women are silent elements in the masculine quest of self-making (64). Thus, the “secret of America,” as Liste-Noya claims, cannot be “unveiled” (4); it is a secret that must be kept in order for America to exist as such. Likewise, Jen’s satirical “American story” reveals the secrets that shape the idea of the Dream and must be kept silent to allow the very Dream to exist.

Typical American is also a satire of the “frontier tale” (Lee 63), where the “frontierman,” the “pioneer,” the Chinese American “Adam” tries to attain his dream “paradise” and ends up paying for his greed. In this frontier tale Ralph epitomizes the Asian

American Adam, who, like Cooper's heroes, attempts to be reborn, innocent, in the new world. However, as discussed in previous chapters, Porte maintains that in Cooper's novels women come to represent barriers and obstacles for these masculine dreams: women are "symbols of what Adam must leave behind or banish from his virgin land" (668). If Jen is satirizing the core of the American Dream, both masculinist and racist, women play the role of Asian Eves who must be punished for the sake of Adam's dream. By condemning Helen and Theresa, Jen is evoking the archetypal Adamic myth and the way that it ignores women's role in the frontier myth.

It can be seen that the meanings of silence in these Asian American narratives of the Dream are manifold. One form of literary silence has been associated with trauma and interpreted from the standpoint of trauma theory. In the texts we are analyzing silence conceals a traumatic memory, which interrupts these characters' lives, stigmatizing them forever. Cathy Caruth has defined trauma as a "wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). Caruth justifies the use of Freud's trauma theories in literature because literature is "interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (3). Mrs. Sen, Moon Orchid, and Aparna are examples of (South) Asian immigrant characters who undergo a "traumatic" experience in America when they all realize that they need to transform themselves in order to adapt to a new reality that does not accept their "original selves." In their self-transformations these women silence those episodes, feelings or memories from a past that is still present. In *Acts of Memory*, Susan Brison claims that trauma involves the "undoing of the self," a process where there is a "disruption of memory," a disconnection between present and past, as well as an "inability to envision a future" (39). The car accident Mrs. Sen has, Moon Orchid's confrontation with the reality of her marriage and life, and Aparna's loss of happiness are

experiences that provoke in these women an “undoing of the self,” echoing Brison, and which leave them torn in a liminal situation where the past intermingles with a present where they cannot see further, they cannot imagine their selves in a future. Except for Kingston’s narrative about Moon Orchid, the aforementioned stories lack closure; these characters’ future is not clear, we do not know if these women are finally going to overcome their traumatic experiences. Jasmine, as I already argued, differs from the other three female characters in her autonomy, individuality and strength in the quest for her own dream. However, *Jasmine* also exemplifies the narratives of trauma where the narrative rhythm is interrupted by the “severed connections among remembered past [and] live present” (Brison 41). Nevertheless, in *Jasmine* there are no references to any anticipated future, as Brison points out when examining trauma narratives. If there is a future, as the final passage suggests, this future is as unpredictable as Jasmine’s present. Kali Tal maintains that narratives of sexual abuse like *Jasmine* mark the beginning of “the process of change” (44). From this perspective, Jasmine’s rape signals the birth of a new woman, a new “self” who will try to envisage a new life, while at the same time keeping those past traumas secret and “silent.”

Asian American Adams: ‘Silent Lives in America’

As observed above, “silence” has traditionally been “gendered,” that is, it has been viewed as proper to women and even considered as a virtue especially “recommended to women.” Nevertheless, as the previous chapter showed, silence can be “imposed” by or else “reactive” to the social constructs that the female immigrants found in America. Simal interprets the Chinese males’ silence in Chinese American narratives not only as an

expression of their own culture of secretiveness, but primarily as a consequence of their migratory history and the racism embedded in the social and legal structures of the new country (111). For many years American history forgot the “existence” of those “China Men” who came to this country and like many other “Americans,” built the future of the new country. “Chinamen” were “erased” from official American history and consequently “silenced.” Simal discusses how the Chinatowns in the works by Kingston, Liu, or Ng are depicted as clamorous, noisy communities where “talk-stories” resonate, keeping alive those stories that serve as bonds with the past and their families in China. Conversely, for Simal, in those Chinatowns there is also a “culture of silence” (112), an imposed silence derived from fears of being deported back to China. The racist constructs that American social and legal structures promoted made “China Men” react “silently” and “secretively.” When, in Jen’s short story “In the American Society,” Ralph becomes the protector of his employees and “talks” to the assistant judge at the Immigration offices to try and release them from their penalties, the reaction on the part of Ralph’s immigrant workers is unexpected: they flee, disappearing without telling anyone, just leaving a note for Ralph. The fear that Ralph’s good intentions will uncover their secret identities leads these illegal immigrants to abandon their employer. The culture of silence emerges as the only answer (Asian) immigrants have to living in America, and it serves as a metaphor for their assimilation into mainstream society. Dana Takagi contends that it was precisely this restrictive culture of silence that turned Asian Americans the “model minority” (199). On the other hand, Ralph’s silence when he faces “real” American society at the party can be read as an imposed silence, coming from his inability to fit in a society that he cannot trust. During the party at the swimming pool, Ralph tries to remain silent, as if words might reveal his difference. However, Ralph finally dares to speak to the host of the party, showing his anger at how he has been treated. When Ralph

leaves the party with his family (131), he is once more looking for the silent refuge that he finds in his “own society.”

As anticipated in previous chapters, the negative portrayal of finds an exception in the figure of the narrator’s father. Maureen Sabine puts forward an intertextual analysis of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, so as to understand the narrator’s relationship with both her mother and father. Other authors such as Lim or Goellnicht have also suggested this interplay between both novels (Lim, *Approaches* 23). Goellnicht maintains that, in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston focuses on the act of reconciliation between daughter and mother (205), which would explain the father’s absence. Sabine argues that in both novels the father is portrayed as “silent,” representing a barrier for his daughter’s quest for answers (7). In *The Woman Warrior*, Brave Orchid warns her daughter not to tell anyone about her no-name aunt: “Don’t let your father know that I told you” (5), epitomizing the silence imposed by cultural traditions, which the young Maxine is trying to understand, and also by her father, the barrier that the narrator faces when she needs answers. At the same time, the portrayal of the father is very compassionate, “my father the one who can recite whole poems” (64).¹¹⁹

At the same time, Kingston’s narrator relates the arrival of her father in America, the pictures he sent, the clothes he wore, as a chronicle of the “China Men” who travelled to and settled in America. She describes her father’s poses in his old snapshots when he had just arrived in America: “He steps out, dancing down the stairs, one foot forward, one back, a hand in his pocket” (60). The portrait of Maxine’s father in *The Woman Warrior* resembles those snapshots the young narrator saw of her father. He is a silenced figure throughout the

119 In fact, Maxine Hong Kingston remembers her father once more in her last book *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, where the writer repeatedly evokes her father and his poetic work, which she could never read with him. Kingston is trying to close the circle she started in *The Woman Warrior*—where her father was an unknown character/presence— and followed with *China Men*—where Kingston “finds” her father. In her recent book, she finally celebrates her father’s writing, bringing to mind good memories where her father used to write to her, “poet to poet” (18).

novel; just a secondary amiable presence. His silence in a story about her mother, as Sabine maintains, makes him the guardian of those traditions and myths that Chinese immigrants brought with them to a country which did not welcome them. It is with silence that the narrator's father chooses to protect his daughter. The father's silent role is, as all silences are, revealing, suggesting the type of relation he has with her daughter and his own "story" in America.

On the other hand, Simal has proposed a reading of the father figure that deconstructs hierarchical constructions of gender (181). Thus, the father figure is distant from those stereotypical masculine models that Asian American cultural nationalists denounced. Kingston's masculine portraits, especially those in *China Men*, have been the object of harsh criticism by the cultural nationalists who condemned her as a promoter of false effeminate stereotypes of Chinese men. Robert G. Lee argues that Chin's struggling against stereotyping gender constructions results in Chin's own "Orientalist construction of gender," where there is a "reassertion of patriarchy" (54). Indeed, the father figure in *The Woman Warrior* is far from being effeminate or castrated; his silence is metaphorically rich. The father's silence nurtures the secretiveness that young Maxine finds when she tries to understand her family's past. In claiming America, the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* retells and speaks out about those secrets which have been trapped in the past, a past that has been silenced for a long time. Now, the young Maxine voices them, ultimately singing the songs from the past.

Similarly "silenced" Adams appear in Lahiri's fiction¹²⁰. As Shankar points the "uniqueness" of Lahiri's work lies precisely in her male characters, who, instead of playing the typical marginal roles other South Asian American writers give them, participate fully in the story. And yet, those masculine characters also "display," I will venture to add, very

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significant silences. Certainly, Lahiri's portrayal of masculine roles does not show the emasculation that cultural nationalists condemned. And yet, Lahiri's male characters tend to be secretive, with the exception of the autodiegetic narrator of the "The Third and Final Continent," who relates his achievement of coming to America using and is the central focalizer in the story. However, this character also shows his "silent" side in the passages where he encounters the "white" old lady, and he just exclaims "splendid" when he hears the story about the first American on the moon. The narrator's silence displays his "difference" when trying to understand the old lady's insistence on the greatness of an American on the moon¹²¹. He does not feel identified with the situation, an American achievement that is secondary and even "foreign" to him. The narrator remains silent, always answering the lady by using the same sentence, thereby revealing that something is lost in translation, something he cannot grasp, for he is not culturally involved in what this lady is telling him. His silence is the silence of those who feel excluded or ostracized—as Ralph is when he only breaks his silence to leave the party at the end of "In the American Society"—. Even the narrator's relationship with Mala, his wife, is characterized by an absence of words: "I waited to get used to her, to her presence at my side, at my table and in my bed, but a week later we were still strangers" (192). He only shows some sympathy for Mala after the "typical American" lady accepts her. He feels that the "cultural" gap that used to separate him from the old lady disappears when the old woman does not see Mala as "different," that is, as a South Asian woman. Mala reminds the protagonist of himself when he had met the lady for the first time too. This scene, I venture to argue, where there is a "re-creation" of an event that happened to the male protagonist before, echoes the trauma theory discussed above. As Caruth states, Freud's trauma theory describes the need for an individual to bring a memory or a traumatic

¹²¹ Zare sees an evident parallelism between the narrator's coming to America and the arrival of the first man on the moon (43), an interpretation that seems to be rather far-fetched.

experience back in order to free him/herself from that trauma (92). The protagonist's silent feelings of alienation vanish as he contemplates the scene between Mala and the lady. Thus, the scene reveals that the first time the protagonist met the American lady, he felt "different," uncomfortable in a place and with a person he did not feel identified with. It is only through the repetition of that event that Mala's husband feels free from the traumatic memory of dislocation that he has been repressing for so long.

"Secrecy"—and therefore "silence"—equally surrounds Ashoke in Lahiri *The Namesake*. Ashoke keeps a secret from his own son, the secret of the name Gogol, which involves the terrible accident Ashoke suffered in India when he was young. Here silence is related to a traumatic experience that Ashoke cannot reveal. He silences a past that haunts his present, because his American son cannot elucidate where the name Gogol, which his father chose for him as "daknam," comes from: "He hates having to tell people that it doesn't mean anything in Indian" (760).¹²² His father's secret about Gogol's name becomes a huge gap or "silence" in Gogol's identity, as he feels his name, which is neither Indian nor American, does not fit his "genuine self." The motif of silence is present again in the conversation Gogol has with his father when the former announces his decision to take another name. As Shubha Mishra puts it, "silence at dinner table" is an uneasy presence (69). The silence that has protected the origin of a name, Gogol, is broken when Ashoke remarks "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish" (100). Again, silence covers Gogol's choice as Ashoke is not going to reveal the significance of this name. Ashoke's secret about the choice of his own son's name comes to be a permanent presence that haunts not only Gogol, but also Ashoke. The secretiveness about a name related to some events in the past will determine non only the

122 As the narrator in *The Namesake* explains to us, "daknam" comes to mean "pet name," "the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood" (26).

immigrant's life, but also the second-generation's identity. Gogol cannot understand his parents' silence over his name; at the same time, he cannot even figure out his own identity as it is incomplete because there is something in it that has not been revealed yet. In "The Inheritance of Postcolonial Loss, Asian American Melancholia, and Strategies of Compensation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," Floyd Cheung and Lavina Dhingra maintain that the "elliptical" moments in the novel serve as "a silent transition between one scene and the next" (32). These silent moments encourage the reader to reconsider what is missing, what has been lost in between the lines. As Cheung and Dhingra contend, one of those elliptical silences occurs when, during a family trip to Calcutta, Gogol's father tells his son about the tradition and the importance of their surname Ganguli (67). Something seems to be missing in the father's explanation. Silence is always present when the past and everything related to it—the origin of the names, the choice of Gogol, the accident—is mentioned or entirely bypassed. This silence ultimately determines the present life of a family whose members, especially Gogol, are trying to discern which part of their selves and identities are still missing and unknown. Hence, silence is also present in South Asian American Adams whose lives in America seem to be easier if they keep some parts of their selves and their pasts hidden. In the case of *The Namesake*, although the father's secrets remain untold, we cannot conclude that the male characters do not maintain the "culture of silence" that the "China Men" need to keep in order to survive in the new country. The silence in Lahiri's novel comes from the need to hide and not reveal the past in a present moment where these characters' lives and identities are being transformed.

3.4. (South) Asian American Eves: Living in the Borderlands

No one ought to be made alien to any country.

No more borders. Nosotros no
cruzamos la frontera; la frontera
nos cruza.

Maxine Hong Kingston, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*.

In her most recent book, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011), Kingston claims that there should not be any borders, immigrants or aliens to any country. There should be a “broad margin” where all differences would be blurred.¹²³ Kingston advocates absence of borders, quoting an immigrants’ rights slogan in Spanish that says that “we do not cross the border, the border crosses us” (69). For some this crossing never ends, so that they remain within the margin of the “borderlands.” Kingston’s comments conspicuously echo Anzaldúa’s theory of border writing put forward in *Borderlands La Frontera* (1987). As is well-known, Anzaldúa distinguishes between the geographical/physical lines, the borders, on the one hand, and the “hybrid” permeable spaces in-between those lines, the “borderlands,” on the other. There have been other interpretations of this “liminal” space, as surveyed in Benito and Manzanar’s critical overview (2002), where they trace the various studies about this space from Anzaldúa to Arteaga and Saldívar. As mentioned in chapter 2.4., on borders, Pratt’s “contact zone” theory or Takaki’s “ethnic island,” to name just a few, similarly attempt to deterritorialize a space where immigrants and transnational individuals live.

123 Kingston is echoing Thoreau’s: “I love a broad margin to my life,” cherishing leisure and relaxing days (*Walden* 108), as she compares the moment she is living now she has ceased teaching and writing with Thoreau’s moment of retirement in his shelter. I interpret Kingston’s “broad margin,” having in mind “borderlands” theory, as the need that the writer sees for those wider margins and borders in order to help the immigrant achieve that locus of freedom that the absence of physical lines and frontiers gives the individual.

What unifies these critical approaches is their conceptualization of “border” as a space simultaneously fixed—understood as a physical line—and “in transition.” These authors coincide in one aspect when they try to ascertain the common denominator in immigrant narratives, a space which is not in mainstream America but exists within America. I have proposed the term “micro-society” to name the liminal space present in my chosen corpus, as my intention is to focus on the subjectivities living within this space rather than on the borders, on the physical lines. I argue that this space is also a “transnational space,” where immigrants manage to build up and construct their new transnational identities which are the result of the complex interplay between their homelands and their new location.

Therefore, my aim in this chapter is to analyze the “micro-societies” where the female characters depicted in our narrative corpus live, spaces in between, borderlands and “micro-societies.” The (South) Asian Eves portrayed in these narratives are “mestizas” who try to juggle two cultures in an attempt to find a cultural balance. As Anzaldúa postulates, the new mestiza imagines new spaces which go beyond any dichotomy, any binary identity (Lunsford 34). Anzaldúa’s borderlands are spaces in between cultures which are constantly being reshaped by their inhabitants. These spaces symbolize the triumph of the imagination over the “tradition of silence” (Anzaldúa 34). In these spaces, diverse cultures and selves engage in unceasing conversation. The “Borderlands” proclaim the victory of those who have been silenced and marginalized by dominant cultures: the “Others,” those displaced by the hierarchical structures of power. Anzaldúa, as Benito and Manzanos maintain, “decenters” the physical lines, recreating them from the dialogic perspectives of gender and ethnicity, in a liminal space, where cultures are continuously permeating one another (*Literature and Ethnicity*, 3).

Another reason why I call those in-between spaces “micro-societies” is the fact those spaces remain parallel to and affect the macro-society, the American mainstream society, in this case. Conceiving borderlands as “micro-societies” makes it easier to comprehend the idea of America as a “macro-society.” As I mentioned in “Constructing Borders” (in chapter 2.4), sociologists have lately contended that only by understanding the individual can we acknowledge the “humansize world” (Collins 242). Furthermore, due to the permeable character of these micro-societies, there is a continuous interplay between them and macro-society. However, these societies or spaces are not the “real America,” as they constitute societies in-between cultures and “macro-societies,” that is, they lie between the mainstream American society and their original or recreated homelands—China or India. Immigrants living in their “micro-societies” can feel that they are living in America, and in some ways they are, as America is the sum of these micro-worlds, but, on the other hand, they are not living in what is conceived of as mainstream society, because they exist “in between cultures.”

Because these “borderlands” are societies, spaces in between cultures, existing within the mainstream society, and the main feature of these hybrid spaces is their changeable, malleable nature, it is also necessary to question what we understand by mainstream America. Even if it is considered as the “permanent,” “dominant,” “unchangeable” entity which serves as reference for the hybrid immigrant spaces, this fixed entity is not so definite as we think it is. America has been shaped by the different people who have inhabited this land; thus, America, as a concept/space, is not fixed and delimited, but a concept/space in progress. Nevertheless, in our imagination there still is a “mainstream” American society which all immigrants confront when they live in the United States. This may seem paradoxical, but in view of Liste-Noya’s thesis in *American Secrets*, this dichotomy is also a manifestation of the

America's core of secrecy, the same one which postulated the Dream and the lack of secrets. American mainstream society is conjured up by those who have envisioned America and those who have built barriers against "unwanted" immigrants. The real American society is a society and a space founded on contradictory premises that restrict this space, a restriction imposed by those who think they are in charge of the continuity of the imaginary ideals on which America was founded. If, at times, America apparently "welcomed" immigrants to participate in the Dream, this happened just for limited periods of time and for limited types of people. Furthermore, immigrants, even after several generations living in America, can still feel like "strangers." In Shawn Wong's *Homebase* (1991), the protagonist, Rainsford Chang, voices this feeling that immigrants undergo, even fourth-generation ones, in their life in America:

And now in America I say to her that I have no place in America, after four generations there is nothing except what America tells me about the pride of being foreign, a visitor from a China I've never seen, never been to, never dream about, and never care about. Or, at best, here in my country I am still living at the fringe, the edge of China. (Shawn Wong 66)

Although the works considered here address first-generation immigrant characters, the second-generation narrator in Wong's *Homebase* exemplifies how the initial feeling of dislocation these immigrants endure when they arrive in America can still persist over several generations. Furthermore, the members first-generation immigrant most poignantly feel that their existence and feelings are split between two countries, two dreams. "What is an American?" St-Jean de Crèvecoeur's impossible question still provokes ambiguous and prejudiced answers. When exactly can an immigrant abandon the micro-society, the

“borderland” and merge with the “mainstream” of American society? This uncertainty also triggers the recurrent question: What is “mainstream America”? Another impossible question.

Jasmine as a “border woman”

Jasmine epitomizes the idea of a “border woman.” At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes Jasmine as an immigrant woman who apparently roots herself in the American Midwest: “The Ripplemeyer land” (7). She is “one of them,” she seems to participate in “white” American society. When the novel opens, Jasmine introduces herself as a Ripplemeyer, her partner’s family name, and, as “one of them,” she belongs in their house and in their land in Iowa, where they are living. However, as we go further into the book, we discover that Mukherjee’s Jasmine is a completely displaced character, who wanders alone, as an American Eve, trying to find her personal happiness. The novel is all about Jasmine’s need to be “her own self,” not what her partners want her (“self”) to become. This inescapable feeling of belonging is clearly expressed when Jasmine dreams of having a green card: “I told him I wanted a green card more than anything else in the world, that a green card was freedom” (149), the “freedom” of being a participant in American society. Jasmine tries to “walk and talk American,” as her mentor Lillian Gordon advises her to do, in order to pass for an “American” (133). As Lillian remarks, though Jasmine’s skin color does not allow the protagonist to pass for white, she encourages Jasmine to act like a “white American” and fit in mainstream America.

Jasmine is constructing a new identity for herself in America and the “borderland” is the space that allows her to reinvent herself multiple times. When we finally think that she has found her place in America, living with Bud, getting pregnant and becoming attached to

the Ripplemeyer's land, Jasmine disappears without saying good-bye to wheelchair-ridden Bud. Kristi Siegel interprets Jasmine's need to "move ahead" as the need for moving and "re-rooting" in other places. Jenkinson argues that Jasmine's life in Iowa could have been the one that defined her, as she could have finally founded a family; however, the prospect of having a family and settling down "permanently" in that land scares her, as she feels that Iowa is not her final destination: "I feel the tug of opposing forces. Hope and pain. Pain and hope" (21). She is still looking for her place in America, and, like the old pioneers, travels to the West in order to reach a "comfort zone." Jasmine has met the "real" American society in Iowa, as well as the Indian ghetto in Flushing, but she rejects both spaces as she cannot be her "self" in either of them. Mukherjee looks askance at both spaces. In fact, she does not praise American society, as Grewal contends: Mukherjee does not want Jasmine to live in either the traditional American community or in an Indian ghetto. Mukherjee maintains that many of her characters "are trying to find a comfort zone between belief and effort, and reward of effort, and destiny" (*Conversations* 110). Living the American Dream, for Mukherjee, does not just mean having "a bigger car"; rather, it entails a "sense of discovering for yourself what you believe and who you want to be" (110). Probably, Jasmine would never reach that comfort zone in the Iowa nor back in India. Her past is still very much present in her life; therefore, her shock of arrival persists.

In a novel that embraces the American Dream, it is very significant that the protagonist who expresses her desire to live in America is still looking for a place in the American society by the end of the novel, which is left open. As alluded to earlier (section 3.1), critical appraisals of *Jasmine* that focus on her negative portrayal of "ethnic" immigrants misconstrue the author's original intention: Mukherjee wants to write a novel about the American Dream and her belief in the Dream, but a novel that also portrays the

price immigrants have to pay for such dreams. Amy W. Nishimura claims that Mukherjee openly criticizes America and its capitalist structure that objectifies the immigrant (119). Nishimura is right to contend that Americans are presented as “caricatures.” This aspect of the novel contradicts the arguments of those critics who consider Jasmine as a naïve immigrant, enchanted by America in a “happily-ever-after” story. When the protagonist says “I wish I’d known America before it got perverted” (201), Mukherjee is really proclaiming her true intentions in this novel: to criticize America’s “hospitality,” the American Dream which has become an American nightmare for many immigrants. In “*Jasmine* or the Americanization of an Asian,” Gönül Pultar argues that the “mainstream” depicted in *Jasmine* is a “wasteland characterized by moral decay” (46), as confirmed by the first image of America (107), which is far from Edenic, as we shall see in chapter 3.8. Jasmine’s rape by the American “outlaw” captain of the boat, soon after arrival, underscores such negative vision. Both passages convey the degradation of America and its Dream, “a harsh indictment of the American way of life” (Pultar 51).

In contrast with the bleak moment of arrival, the last we know of Jasmine places her in the paradigm of the “borderwoman,” going West in an ongoing quest¹²⁴. She is looking for their space in America, which is not the corrupted mainstream society, nor the “unreal” Indian ghetto created by the immigrants’ collective imagination; it is something in-between, a “micro-society” that allows the immigrant to live in her/his own space within the mainstream society. As “borderlands,” these micro-societies are not fixed entities, but constitute a continuous “encountering” of cultures. I agree with Siegel when she claims that the myth of the “frontier” is evoked at the end of *Jasmine*: “Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier

¹²⁴ At the end of the novel, she also trusts she will find Du, her adopted son, the other culturally “dislocated” character in *Jasmine*. As Pultar puts it, both Jasmine and Du are “doomed to remain in a sort of limbo” (55). We shall discuss the parallelism between both character in chapter 3.7.

is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows” (Mukherjee 240). Mukherjee is not merely echoing the idea of the “frontier” in this passage; these words conjure up the essence of the “frontier,” that is the “promise of self-transformation,” following the “traces of former immigrants” (204). Jasmine pushes away from the Midwest, leaving deep America, to look for her Dream in the West, as the ultimate space where she can build her “self.” Like the South Asian American writer Meena Alexander, Jasmine is also a “woman cracked by multiple migrations” (*Fault Lines* 2). Jasmine is cracked because of her cross-cultural journey, where she needs to re-negotiate her multiple “selves.” Jasmine comes to be the personification of the ideal of the American Dream: you can start again, forget your previous life and become what you long for. That is what Mukherjee gives the reader at the end of the novel: the hope of a better future. However, there is a price the immigrant has to pay for pursuing the American dream, and the price is all too clear for Jasmine.

The Changs’ Own Space

As we have seen in previous chapters, in the short story “In the American Society,” Jen describes the unsuccessful attempts of a Chinese American family, the Changs, to join the “typical” American country club. In this attempt to integrate into American society—an effort led by the youngest daughter, Mona—the Chinese father is the member in the family who voices most objections to leaving and against merging with the American society. As Mrs. Chang states, Ralph just wants to live in his own society (116). He is happy for the pancake house and the family’s house to be the only world he moves in, the only world that he controls. In fact, the narrator shows a man who is at a complete loss when he is finally in contact with “mainstream” America: “my father tried to eat a cracker full of shallots, and

burned himself in an attempt to help Mr. Lardner turn the coals of the barbecue” (127). Ralph cannot keep up with the “quintessential” American way of life, whose basic codes he still does not know.

In “Moving selves,” Simal addresses the Chang’s “Americanness” as ironically portrayed in Jen’s *Typical American*. Simal contends that the Changs feel completely “at home” in America until the “racist” episode at the ball game where some people tell them to go back to their laundry (159). Jen denounces the impossibility for this family to blend with the real American society, using humor as a soothing weapon to alleviate the blatant discrimination that Chinese immigrants encounter in the new country. The scene that Simal draws attention to shows some parallelism with the party episode from “In the American Society.” In both episodes Jen parodies the immigrants’ need to return to their own micro-societies. The title of the story is paradoxical enough: in a narrative that claims to be about living in American society, the Chinese “micro-society” is Jen’s real subject.

Already in the first section, “His Own Society,” the narrator describes how Ralph has constructed his own society where he helps other immigrants to come to America, regardless of American immigration laws. In “his own society” Mr. Chang feels safe and sure of his value, because he lives the kind of life he wants to live, and he does not need to pretend to be a “typical Anglo-white American.” The significance that the ethnic community has for Mr. Chang is understood when, after the bad experience that the family suffers in the American party, they find refuge in their own world, “their own society.” This short story illustrates how the Changs, once they abandon their own “micro-society,” feel threatened; their “comfort” zone is their own space where Chinese, and other ethnic cultures live together on

the margins of the real American society.¹²⁵ However, this “borderland” space, because of its porousness, also “absorbs” and “combines with” the American society. Nevertheless, when the members of this micro-society try to merge with the members of the “real” one, the combination becomes a fiasco.

The party at Mrs. Lardner’s contains some elements that seem drawn from stereotypical images of American society, which Jen employs to render this first encounter between the Changs and mainstream American society even more ridiculous. There are some examples of communication problems between Mr. Chang and Jeremy, the Anglo-American whom the party is thrown for. The misunderstanding derives from the mutual lack of knowledge of their respective cultures, and also from the preconceptions Jeremy has of Chinese people. After asking Mr. Chang who he is and what he is doing at his party—a question that this “American” guest would probably never ask if Mr. Chang looked “white” and not obviously Asian—Jeremy tries to apologize. However, his apologies turn into an offer of gifts or money to solve the problem: “What can I do? How can I make it up to you? . . . Tickets to casino night?” (130). This passage reveals how slippery the situation becomes for the “American” character when he encounters the “Other.” Jeremy immediately realizes the terrible mistake he has committed: he has triggered off the old racial stereotypes in his approach to Ralph, a guest. Jeremy embodies the “typical American,” an educated man who tries to repair American history of racism and exclusion. He is himself probably against any racial discrimination, but, unconsciously, he has gone too far with his guest just because of his “racialized body.” His reaction also suggests that he considers himself to be in a position of superiority, a position that allows him to solve the terrible misunderstanding with

125 In *Diasporic Representations* Pin-chia Feng argues that Jen dismantles Kim’s concept of “horizontal communities” in *Mona in the Promised Land*. Jen offers Mona a horizontal community, Camp Gugelstein, where different genders and ethnicities are mixed. However, as Feng contends, the deconstruction of this space and its elements, stereotypes and racial boundaries, reveals the utopian character of this type of community (79).

money. Besides, Jeremy's offering of money for the casinos also indicates that he is implicitly suggesting that Ralph, like many Chinese people, likes gambling. Thus, Jeremy's comments are full of negative stereotypes about the "Chinese people." On the other hand, Chang's reaction to Jeremy's offer is to refuse the compensation gifts because he does not enjoy "taking orders like a servant" (131). Jen describes the scene at the swimming pool as the moment where the Changs get to know the "real" American society they had never met before. The society where they had been living in is not the "real" American society, but a society in between that mainstream world and their Asian American community.

Jen depicts the American society by using a group of symbols that are "typical American": the country club, the barbecue, and the swimming pool are recurrent and powerful elements that are present not only in the American collective imagination, but also in the minds of non-American readers, who easily identify these elements with the wealthy American lifestyle. Since the 1950s, popular culture, especially the influential film and television industry, has created an image that has lured both American and non-American minds with a repertoire of images intrinsically associated with the typically American lifestyle. In her recent memoir *The Language of Baklava*, Diana Abu-Jaber, a Jordanian American author also resorts to those "typical American" symbols, such as the barbecue and the "backyard" and she addresses directly the meaning of these two images in the American society: the family cannot use the front yard to eat, it is unthinkable in America. The barbecue must be in the backyard. The immigrant family re-enacts these American elements in a new Jordanian way. Unfortunately, any alternative to this established "tradition" is seen as a sacrilege by the "white" American neighbors. Jen repeats these "trademarks" in her story just to create a situation: a party in a country club, familiar for the reader, but completely unfamiliar to the Chinese American family, a situation where they feel out of place. The

Changs can join the country club, but they cannot be regarded as “genuine” members of “the” American club, because the Changs interpret that “tradition” in their own terms.

Therefore, the American Dream the Changs want to live is an illusion, since they are living in an imaginary America: their own micro-society. They are “border” characters living in their “borderland,” a space which is not America nor China. This space is “imaginary,” as it is founded on the idea these immigrants have of America, an idea that is just that, a fiction.

In the stories analyzed in this dissertation, social acceptance is far from real: the frontier of the body and the “immigrant” label never vanish. Conversely, “vertical mobility,” that is, economic success can be attained rather easily. In *Typical American*, Jen openly criticizes the gendered American Dream, but also the capitalist side of the Dream, embodied in Ralph’s greediness. Ralph forgets his Confucian education, even when he had deliberately affirmed he did not want to become “an American citizen,” as he wants to keep China as his “home” (42). Once more, Jen employs some “stereotypical” elements in the narrative, such as the car, the house, the dog... The purchase of a house in a quintessential “Anglo-Saxon” Protestant neighborhood, the car, or the dog, give the Changs the opportunity to feel that they have “made it” in America, but, at the same time, they ironically point at the Chinese family’s complete displacement within the American society. The Changs’ house has a backyard and a garden, just like their neighbors the Kennedys, but their lawn is fake. In fact, the Changs have some problems at the beginning, because they cannot make this grass grow, they do not know which type of fertilizer Americans use in their lawns. Furthermore, their dog, a necessary complement to their house with backyard, is on the verge of killing Theresa; in fact, it is the dog, a pitbull, which forces Theresa to dash out in front of Ralph’s car (280) and end up in hospital, in a coma. The Changs try to emulate the typically American lifestyle, but their interpretations of it are, at best, absurd and inappropriate. They do not fit in the “real”

American society, but neither do they belong in Chinatown, as their brief visit to Chinatown reveals (see section 3.1). They need to find a space in between, a borderland where they can juggle both cultures without feeling “weird,” foreign or out of place.

Narayan’s statement that South Asian immigrants do not seem interested in participating in the American society is not confirmed in Jen’s narratives. “In the American Society,” like the rest of the texts explored here, displays a clear attempt to establish contact with the host society on the part of the immigrant character. However, this intention is thwarted in most cases, and it signals the core of the problem: they are perceived to be different. The Changs have attained the American dream in the economic field: their business goes well, even when the father often ignores the American laws and follows his own. The final step to reach the American Dream, however, involves social integration in the host society, and the Changs try to achieve it by joining an American country club. The swimming-pool party episode proves that, while economic success seems possible, social integration is a more difficult task.

Zhou Xiaojing points out how Jen emphasizes the limits of the American dream by drawing special attention to the limits of the immigrant’s individual freedom in America: “The paradox of freedom and its limits is a major theme of Jen’s novel. In showing the limits of individual will and knowledge from the immigrant’s perspective, Jen means also to point to the limits of the American Dream personified by the protagonist of Horatio Alger’s novels” (158). Even when immigrants eagerly want to participate and merge with mainstream American society, in the end, there are limits to one’s freedom, especially for an immigrant, as Jen suggests, and these become a barrier in achieving the American Dream. The Changs can picture themselves living the Dream, but only in their imaginations, since, in actual fact,

when they step out of their own micro-society, they find limitations that preclude their complete participation in the Dream.

We can conclude, then, that the Changs find their personal freedom in their own “micro-society,” made up of their house and business. That apparent initial prosperity remains circumscribed to the Chinese community, to their own world, which is not perceived as the “real America.” If the first section of “In the American Society” relates how the Chinese family achieves economic prosperity, the second part shows how that possibility of attaining the American Dream falls into pieces, as the family finds no place “in the American society.”

Lahiri’s Lonely Spaces

Ashima, the name of one character in Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake*, means “without borders,” and she, like many other South Asian female characters in Lahiri’s narratives, must cross many borders, not only the physical lines that represent nations, but, more often and relevant for our purposes, the invisible cultural, social and individual borders that subtly delimit these women’s lives. These borders are not, however, constraining frontiers that divide peoples, but zones that recall Anzaldúa’s idea of borderlands as liminal, fluid and valuable spaces. Anzaldúa envisions this space as an interstitial zone, not fixed, where subjectivities are in constant reshaping, much like the space itself, which is saturated with “incommensurable contradictions that shape the cultural identities of the hybridized objects” (Cheng 22). Such a space allows a dialogue, as the “borders” are not definite but permeable.

Kathy-Ann Tan is right to contend that Lahiri's stories subvert dichotomies as "insider"/"outsider" or "home"/"foreign land," rendering the immigrant experience inherently manifold (233). Indeed Lahiri avoids these archetypal binaries and incorporates parallelisms with "American" characters in order to deflate the paradigm of the clash of cultures. From the viewpoint of the Borderlands theory, I would argue that Lahiri's narratives emphasize the ongoing negotiation between cultures and also, to some extent, between the "micro-societies" where these characters live. In this conflict between the flexible idea of borderlands and the physical reality of boundaries, Lahiri highlights the recurrent motif of loneliness and disappointment.

In "Mrs. Sen's," Lahiri introduces us to a young South Asian woman who, as already discussed, remains nameless: "Professor's wife, responsible and kind" (111). This description is everything we know about her, apart from the memories and stories she tells Eliot about her family and traditions in India. The decisive episode of the car accident happens as the result of Mrs. Sen's "intrusion" into mainstream society. She is not confident about driving in America. For her, driving a car entails "embracing" and "participating in" the real America outside her home. However, her meeting with the real society ends in the same way as Ralph Chang's "intrusion" into America: both go back to their "safe" space. I would argue that this "return" to their own community could be read as Lahiri's and Jen's criticism of how the American Dream actually works for immigrants. At the end of these stories, the characters opt to seclude themselves from the mainstream society they have tried to merge with. Ralph and Mrs. Sen equally feel that they do not belong in America. By denying them the chance to join the "American society," Lahiri and Jen criticize the false expectations that the lure of the national myth still creates within the immigrant community.

Lahiri conjures up an attenuated critique of the situation of South Asian immigrants in the United States, both in the American and South Asian contexts. For Mrs. Sen the act of driving symbolizes crossing those “invisible” lines that separate her from the new culture. Mrs. Sen identifies driving by herself with “melting” with the mainstream society, where driving is an everyday activity. However, Mrs. Sen feels like an “outsider” who does not really fit in America. The first time the character speaks in the text is when she is asked about her driving license, and she answers that she has never needed a license before, because they have a driver “at home” (113). Mrs. Sen’s mind is still anchored in her Indian past she had in India; hence she does not see the point in learning to drive. She has not adapted to the new circumstances, because she is still living in her imagined space. There is a scene when Eliot’s mother corrects Mrs. Sen—“You mean a chauffeur?” (113)—which represents the conflict of being caught between cultures, a situation to which Mrs. Sen reacts with silence, a silence that confines and isolates her in her own space, where she feels safe from any criticism. Actually, every time Mrs. Sen leaves her in-between space, she feels “attacked,” she does not feel welcomed; hence, she refuses to join the “real” mainstream society. One day, when driving the car with her husband’s help, she feels completely intimidated by the other “American” drivers: “A car beeped its horn, then another. She beeped defiantly in response, stopped, then pulled without signaling to the side of the road. ‘No more’” (131). The episode in the bus is equally revealing. Mrs. Sen carries the fresh fish she has just bought when the bus driver asks her two questions: if she can speak English and what is in the bag,” since the smell of the fish is upsetting the other passengers in the bus. Mrs. Sen is shocked by the situation and also by the fact that the bus driver presumes that she cannot speak English. Mrs. Sen answers that she can speak English and that the bag has fish in it (133). Again, Mrs. Sen faces an uncomfortable and disappointing situation that makes her retreat back into her space.

Hence, she decides to remain in her “micro-society,” a space which is neither America, nor India, but where she feels secure. Noelle Brada-Williams has claimed that the American behavior, polite without intruding into the other’s life, is what makes Mrs. Sen homesick. Williams argues that the scene of the car accident is provoked by Mrs. Sen’s inability to refrain from intruding into the lives of other drivers an intrusion prompted by her need for a community (459). I agree with Williams, as Mrs. Sen’s problems start with her need for what she had in India: family and friends, that is, a community. Now, in America, Mrs. Sen is alone, and she cannot bear that feeling of loneliness, because she does not feel confident enough to live a life on her own. Furthermore, the figure of her husband does not make Mrs. Sen feel less alone in America; on the contrary, Mr. Sen’s own life seems to be disengaged from his wife’s daily routine. Throughout the story Lahiri emphasizes how Mrs. Sen’s attempt to do something on her own, drive a car, shows her vulnerability if she ventures to participate in American society, as she does not see herself as “truly American.” Consequently, she is not confident in what she does “alone” in the mainstream society. She needs “her people.”

Lahiri also depicts the characters in “Hell-Heaven” as living in their own “micro-society” in America. The only character who complains about the cultural negotiation is the narrator-daughter, who urges her mother to realize that she is also an American girl. Although there is a cultural gap between mother and daughter, first and second generations, they both feel trapped in between two cultures. However, whereas the mother wants to keep her Indian traditions at home and transmit them to her daughter, the daughter refuses, because she wants to embrace the American culture. In a scene that can be aptly described as “saris vs. jeans,” the young girl changes her Indian clothes for a pair of jeans and she feels “finally like

[her]self” (80). The daughter is a second generation South Asian American girl who claims her “Americanness” in her family space.

Intergenerational “warfare” is a recurrent theme in immigration literature. The clash between parents and children who attempt to find their respective “space” and “culture” is present in most of the immigrant narratives where first and second generations coexist. Indeed, Lahiri gives accounts of this generational conflict between the “Americanized” children and the Bengali parents, in several of her stories as well as in her novel *The Namesake*.¹²⁶ In this novel, the opposition “melamine vs. silver”—noticeable when Ashima sees that the utensils in her American kitchen are not silver like the ones she had in India—symbolizes the opposition between America/present and India/past as well as first generation immigrants versus their American children. Another generational conflict depicted in *The Namesake* happens when the son, Gogol, hides his “American life” from his parents. He even changes his (Russian) name, which he thinks “sounds” funny and does not suit him, for a more fitting (American) name. In the end, Gogol has two names as he has two lives: the American and the Bengali. His “self” is divided into the two cultures that inhabit his space.

Another example of generational clash can be found in Lahiri’s short story “Hell-Heaven,” where the family also live safely in their “comfort zone,” which is created by the family and other Indian acquaintances. When they celebrate Thanksgiving with other American people they feel completely out of place. The young girl and narrator of the story is the bridge between the American and Indian cultures. Lahiri finally achieves a resolution at the end of this story. The mother, Aparna, eventually realizes that her daughter needs to live and experience her American reality: “she has accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well” (82). Conversely, Aparna, who has solved her

126 In Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* many of the short stories devote their lines to these generational conflicts, the so-called “ethnic burden” that second generation immigrants must understand and carry on.

misunderstanding with her lover's wife, seems to accept her solitary existence, confined in the house after her attempt to commit suicide.

Lahiri, like Jen, also displays several symbols of "Americanness" in "Hell-Heaven": the car, the big house, Thanksgiving dinner and dogs. The use of these symbols frame the world outside the immigrants' micro-society, and mark the "differences" between their routines and traditions and those of the mainstream society. Once again, Lahiri reaches a point of balance between American and South Asian characters; in her stories, the main conflictive issues affect both American and Indian characters equally. Thus, in "Hell-Heaven" the clash of cultures experienced by the daughter is felt equally by Deborah, the American wife of Pranab. Lahiri is not interested in consolidating the patterns that other Asian American writers followed, where they emphasized the dichotomy American versus Asian. As we have seen, Lahiri wants both American and immigrant characters to feel and transmit common issues such as loneliness, love conflicts or cultural clash, affecting Aparna or Mrs. Sen in the same way as their American acquaintances. In "The Third and Final Continent," Mala an apparently secondary character, spends her days in America, living apart from the main society, until the day her husband introduces her to the American old lady: "This is my wife, madame" (195). This scene signifies Mala's entrance in America: "I like to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft's parlor as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen" (196). When the old lady approves of Mala, it seems that her husband appreciates it and starts considering Mala as part of his life. However, after this scene where Mala is introduced to "America," she will probably return to her solitary space.

The Orchids' spaces

In *Literature and Ethnicity in the Borderlands*, Benito and Manzanos contend that Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* tackles the idea of borderlands and border encounters by showing the conflictive and disconnected relation between "Chinese-Americans and ghosts" (5). In my opinion, the young narrator moves between the borders of the Chinese American context, the Chinese myths and traditions and ghosts, the "American unknown reality." The borderlands Kingston constructs in *The Woman Warrior* transcend a merely binary relation between Chinese versus American. In the debate of diaspora in the context of transnational identities, James Clifford maintains that diaspora and borders are up to some point paradigms that "bleed into one another," and transnational connections break the dichotomy existing between minority discourse and majority societies (311). Diasporic languages, according to Clifford, seem to enrich the minority discourse as diasporas connect multiple subjectivities and communities.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrative creates a peculiar "micro-society," a space not formulated in opposition to the majority society, but as a different space that can only be conceived in its relation with the mainstream society. Only the "bodily" frontiers, echoing Anzaldúa, divide and separate these micro-societies from the rest of the mainstream America, creating a space where the "color line," the "body," cultures and languages become undifferentiated. In "At the Western Palace," Kingston's references to this space, the "micro-society," prove numerous and significant.

Despite Wong's and Shu's proposed reading of Brave Orchid and her sister as antagonistic opposites, these characters are not so far apart in terms of the official "space"

they occupy in the American society, and the “place” they fail to find there. True enough, Moon Orchid ultimate failure to find her “place” in America is more dramatic. She represents a dislocated character whose inability to confront reality ends up killing her. Moon Orchid is unable to find her “place” either in America or in China, where she has been living a lie. Thus, she spends the last days of her life in a mental asylum with those who, like her, cannot or do not want to discern what “real” life is like, those who, unable to “belong” anywhere, speak nonsense.

What is more surprising is the fact that, Brave Orchid, the comparatively more “Americanized” sister, does not participate in the “real” America either. The life and place she knows and inhabits is the Chinatown society. As Shu states, Brave Orchid’s life is committed to the laundry and she never thinks about the “Chinese-American reality” (214) outside her “micro-society,” where she feels confident and able to live the Dream that she wants to transmit to Moon Orchid¹²⁷. However, when she accompanies her sister to Los Angeles, Brave Orchid comes into contact with the “real” society. Unfortunately, this “contact” with the reality outside her “own society” does not lead to a happy ending. The unsuccessful resolution of her sister’s problem causes Brave Orchid to deny American reality. The image of Brave Orchid throwing away the medicines the doctor has given to her sister represents Brave Orchid’s conviction that nothing good can come from the society outside her own “micro-society”: “She threw out the Thorazine and vitamin B that a doctor in Los Angeles had prescribed” (157). Brave Orchid is a displaced character living in her space, a space where she can live the America she has envisioned, the America of her Dreams. However, America turns to be quite different from Brave Orchid’s idealized country. The “mainstream” society she meets in Los Angeles is a society that Moon Orchid’s husband has

¹²⁷ Likewise, there are similarities between Kingston’s Brave Orchid and Jen’s Ralph Chang in their blind trust in the Dream, though Brave Orchid does not voice this idea in the same way that Ralph does.

“created” for himself, according to his Dream. Therefore, as I asked before, is there a “real” mainstream society? I would argue that this mainstream society responds to some founding ideals, established by a powerful group who aims to keep this idea of “real” America. Moon Orchid’s husband has achieved his Dream, both economic and social, by participating in the real America outside Chinatowns. Moon Orchid’s husband comes to represent that materialistic and patriarchal side of the American Dream. Thus, I would argue that Kingston uses this male character, whom the readers do not empathize with, to condemn the masculinist nature of the Dream, where Eves are merely “black holes—vacuums” (Lee 64).

Brave Orchid’s borderlands are also present in her relationship with her American children. She has multiple confrontations with her children, as she does not understand how they can be so “American”: “Her American children had no feelings and no memory” (115). Consequently, the situation that Brave Orchid faces pushes her to construct a “third space,” evoking Bhabha’s postcolonial notion of a space in between, as “it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (*Location of Culture* 56). In fact, the “ghosts” that the characters in *The Woman Warrior* see everywhere are interpreted by Malini Schueller in *The Politics of Voice: Liberalism and Social Criticism from Franklin to Kingston* (1992), as resulting from the experience of living in between cultures (60). I would claim that the ghost is the unknown, and the unknown is, following Schueller, what is not found in American or Chinese “logic,” the in-betweenness itself.

In “Repositioning the Stars,” Qun Wang states that, in Asian American narratives, there is a visible “willingness to cross borders to recreate one’s identity and to come to terms with being a hyphenated American,” and for immigrants this willingness is translated into stories where they “negotiate a ground on which they can create and embrace their true

identity” (91). The “true identity” Wang mentions is the identity the immigrants aim to create when they are living in between, away from their homelands, where the immigrants have also left some part of their identities. As Wang maintains, the immigrant needs to inhabit a space, a borderland, where she/he can develop her/his own identity, which embraces all the cultural spaces surrounding the borders that delimit them. This view contrasts with Narayan’s thesis that the South Asian immigrant community intentionally refuses to mingle with the host society. On the contrary, there is a necessity to create a space where the characters can evolve their identities, as Wang suggests, as hyphenated Americans. Brave Orchid, Jasmine, the Chang family, and Lahiri’s characters all live in that middle ground or borderland between two cultures, the “micro-society” where they create a world in which they can live. As Anzaldúa claims, the borderland is the space where the immigrant who remains outside the mainstream society can survive in the host country. It is a space with no geographical or physical borders, but with cultural, social and body “frontiers.” When Jasmine, Mrs. Sen, Aparna, the Orchids, Mala, Helen or Theresa, as well as their masculine counterparts, cross the geographical borders and arrive in America, those physical lines vanish. However, there are other intangible lines that make them different from others, as the body, the language, the culture constitute elements that further enclose them in their solitary spaces. These characters need to find a chosen “limbo” where they can build their identities and, at the same time, live in America. These Asian American “Eves” and “Adams” inhabit this idiosyncratic micro-society, unceasingly negotiating their identities.

3.5. Promise of Freedom versus Domestic Space

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard addresses the idea of the house as a significant element in narrative discourse since spaces in general, and houses in particular, mirror human memories, hopes and dreams. The significance of Bachelard's statement that "the house protects the dreamer" (6) serves as a starting point for my discussion of the role of domestic space in immigration narratives of the American Dream. As we have seen, there are some barriers that deny immigrants the ability to fully participate in mainstream society, forcing them to construct their own spatial haven, which I have proposed calling "micro-societies." At the same time, houses emerge as particular spaces within these micro-societies, where the house does not always symbolize a "protection" for the (South) Asian American female dreamers.

According to Le Espiritu, many Asian Americans have adopted the Eurocentric gender ideology as a way to "assimilate" into American social structures (*Asian American* 136). The Eurocentric division of labor and, consequently, of space, has traditionally placed men in the public sphere, as the "breadwinners," and women in the private domestic space, as "full-time homemakers and mothers" (135). At this point, it is necessary to recall the history of Asian migrations in America and how these migrations were shaped according to various exclusion quotas, which especially affected Chinese immigrants. As is well known, before the Second World War, the presence of Chinese women in America was almost nonexistent, due to the exclusion laws aimed at restricting—even in the reproductive sense—the growth of the Chinese community in America. At the same time, in traditional Asian societies, it was not proper for women to travel far away from home (Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans* 104);

hence, the patriarchal patterns already existing in these immigrants' cultures also prevented Asian women from emigrating. In America, in the so-called "bachelor societies," the absence of women nurtured an alternative social arrangement where Chinese men had to learn women's traditional role, that of housekeeper. Le Espiritu argues that, after World War II, when exclusion laws were finally lifted and Chinese women could join their husbands in America, those bachelors' "domestic" past encouraged a renegotiation between men and women of new divisions of labor in both public and private spheres.

South Asian immigrants were not so numerous as the Chinese, and they did not suffer from exclusion laws until much later. In fact, until 1910, there was no legislation controlling the entrance of South Asian immigrants to the United States. However, the common experience that these Asian immigrant women, hailing from Asian countries, shared was the fact that all of them came to America not by their personal choice, but following their husbands and /or brothers. In fact, in a recent sociological study of South Asian Americans work, Scott Ingram points out how, despite the increasing number of South Asian professionals who were coming to America at the end of the 20th century, wives usually came afterwards, once their husbands were established in the new country (19). However, as discussed in chapter 2.1, most South Asian immigrants were professionals, whereas most Chinese immigrants came without a degree or with little money to find or build a means of livelihood in America. This difference in terms of economic and professional situation gave these immigrant groups different opportunities.

Therefore, the context of the Asian migrations and the gendered American Dream conditioned the experience of these immigrant women in the new country. Initially, these women were circumscribed, almost exclusively, to the domestic space, in contrast with the public sphere, the space associated with men, a dichotomy promoted by the traditional

Western division of labor as much as by immigrants' own cultures. In *Theorizing Diaspora*, Gayatri Gopinath identifies the tendency in nationalistic discourses to recognize women as the "symbolic center and boundary marker of the nation as 'home' and 'family'" (262), whereas feminist scholars have recently tried to subvert the domestic sphere as the site for women in both ethnic and non-ethnic literatures. As Teresa Gómez Reus affirms in *Inside Out*, "spatial confinement" has been, in the history of literature, the common experiences of female characters. In this "transnational" immigration literature, more specifically, the binary opposition of domestic/public also underlies most of the narratives. The domestic space is not a personal choice for these female characters; in fact for many of them it is a form of imposed seclusion. One cannot forget the role of immigrant women in exile was also that of keepers of their own culture in the household, as a way of defining the immigrant family in contrast with the American culture: "The perceived threat to ethnic identity intensifies the investment in preserving 'tradition,' an embattled communal response that recasts 'tradition' as the woman's proper role and responsibility" (Le Espiritu 142). In "Contesting Cultures," the introductory chapter to *Dislocating Cultures* (1997), Uma Narayan describes the way she is forced to "dichotomize" her own life into two different lives: her job, in the public sphere, where she uses a "feminist framework," and the private sphere, where she follows a "traditional framework" (93).¹²⁸ Alternatively, postcolonial critic Sara Upstone has interpreted the domestic space as a site of "power contestation" (260), the perfect space when questioning colonial powers. In colonial gendered spaces, constructed following Victorian social models, which itself served colonial needs, the domestic space was the space for women. The cornerstone of this colonial gendered division of the space rested on the fact that

128 In her article "Cross-Cultural Subjectivities: Indian Women Theorizing in the Diaspora," Elizabeth Russell describes the tensions South Asian immigrant women live in the diaspora, as they try to find an equilibrium between the domestic sphere and the public sphere. Russell also explores the tensions of living in between cultures not only in the case of first-generation immigrants, but also in the case of their children and how these subsequent generations are affected by their ancestors' constructed "Indianness" at home (94).

home represented the antithesis of what the space outside home meant. In this colonial context, the territory outside the domestic space was unknown and chaotic, a space that the male settlers had to colonize, acquire and civilize. The domestic space was, quite on the contrary, seen as the opposite to the disorder and confusion outside home. Thus, the colonial home was the space where women had to nurture and keep the values that men were trying to impose outside home. Therefore, as Upstone suggests, in their own microcosmic society, women echoed the political agenda their husbands were living outside, in the public sphere (118). Western feminism has traditionally declared the domestic space the locus for the confinement of women's lives and hopes. The spatial politics is still somehow present in the feminist discourse in its exploration of masculinist power and feminist resistance (57). Both in academic circles and in contemporary society, there is an ongoing re-negotiation of the spaces as well as the boundaries that in many cases define gender differences. It is also important to point out that, as Upstone contends, in some societies, especially those which support spatial segregation, recent feminist scholarship has observed the permanence of the idea that relates the domestic space with the lowest status in society (58). South Asian culture, as Upstone identifies, represents one example of this segregational discourse where feminists are still struggling to redefine and "empower" the domestic space.

When discussing domestic space, it is necessary to refer to another element associated with the domestic sphere, interpreted here as a space where culture is transmitted and lived in immigrant narratives: food. "Home" is the place where "ethnic" food is prepared as a way of keeping and evoking the homeland. Since women's space has been seen as the domestic sphere, they have also been viewed as the ones in charge of cooking: "However much you study, and however highly educated you are, ultimately you will always have to chop onions" (Katrak, "Food and Belonging" 268). Such sexist beliefs, even if still quite

widespread, recall those social constructions of gender difference so deeply embedded in the minds of previous generations.

In “Food and Belonging,” Ketu Katrak conjures up her memories of home by learning to cook, she tries to remember those recipes her mother and grandmother used to cook for the family. By cooking Indian food, Katrak feeds her memories, identity and nostalgia. The author returns home as she acknowledges “food as an essential connection with home” (270). Her home is her body, which wanders through several homes and languages and foods. Laura Anh Williams identifies the role of food in Asian American literature as a metaphor for the immigrant’s subjectivity. Anita Mannur has coined the term “culinary citizenship,” which explores the intertwined connections between food, nostalgia and national identity, and especially how homelands are recalled in immigrant narratives. In *Eating Identities*, Wenying Xu claims that food must be considered as an essential element in the construction of ethnic communities abroad. In fact, Xu revises Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities,” urging the incorporation of food within the range of elements according to which Anderson structures identifications with a community (3). The “imaginary homelands” that immigrants recreate and envisage abroad can reproduce and repeat cultural elements anchored in the past, whose representation in the present lives of these communities away from their homelands creates an “imaginary” culture out of place and time. However, it can be argued that food may be the only “ingredient” of a national/regional culture that never changes in the immigrant’s mind—in the same way that immigrants evoke their “imaginary homelands,” they replicate their “imaginary food,” which will always be the same, as the only way to capture homeland and community. Such perceived permanence is specially helpful in affirming both feelings of community and family for both immigrants and non-immigrants (Xu 3).

The Asian American female characters in our narratives often cook “ethnic foods” in the new American context. For most of them, cooking is their everyday routine, as their lives are circumscribed to the domestic sphere. For others, cooking is a “cultural burden” they have to carry in order to replicate their native land and mitigate their homesickness. However, nostalgia is not always present in these narratives. As Gita Rajan contends, food serves as a connection between the immigrant and his/her homeland as well as a connection with other immigrants in their communal attempt to build up new spaces and communities in America. Immigrants “ensure” their identities through their ethnic food. However, as Paula Torreiro affirms in “Living in the Taste of Things” (2011), food can also represent one of the most visible “signs of difference” and distinctiveness within the conventional culinary framework of the American society. Food helps communities to cohere but, conversely, it stratifies ethnicities (Xu 6).

South Asian American Eves in the Domestic Space

In Elisabetta Marino’s interview with Shirley Lim, the latter claims that an intersectional relation exists between the diasporic discourse and the gendered feminist one. Lim argues about how diasporic women, in their gendered bodies, are usually circumscribed to conventionally “female-identified” work, for instance, housekeepers (244). In Lahiri’s short stories, all of the first-generation female characters—Mrs. Sen, Mala or Aparna—are shown to be enclosed within the domestic space in their housekeeping roles. In the case of the first character mentioned above, the title of the story itself is conspicuous: “Mrs. Sen’s.” And, indeed, the story is about Mrs. Sen’s space, a space in a house that is not really her home yet, as she is still looking for it. When Mrs. Sen says “Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has

brought me” (115), she is underscoring the fact that she still needs to find her space. The house, like the country itself, is unknown and strange for her. Nevertheless, it is there where she spends most of her days alone or with Eliot, cooking and emulating her life in India. Thus, the title encapsulates Mrs. Sen’s contradictory situation. On the one hand, the story is about Mrs. Sen’s house and home, where she lives her life in America, but, on the other hand, “Mrs. Sen’s” omission of the word house or home reveals Mrs. Sen’s tragedy of not being able to find such space into her own “place.” Thus, echoing Yi-Fu Tuan’s thesis on “space” and “place” that I will discuss further in the following paragraphs, we can identify that Mrs. Sen’s problem in America is mainly that she has not found yet her “place” in America. Tuan maintains that there are strong ties between space and the individual’s emotions. Indeed, this connection between space and sentiments creates emotional attachments between the individuals and their “places,” their houses, their neighborhoods in such a way that an unfamiliar neighborhood can even unsettle and confuse someone (74). Hence, Mrs. Sen’s inability to find her “space,” and “place” in America is translated in the short story into the frustration she feels anytime she wants to accomplish something.

The food component in “Mrs. Sen’s” is very significant, as the protagonist is often busy, engaged in preparing the same Bengali food she used to prepare at home in India. Within the context of Asian literature, food has always been a controversial element, for its distinctive “homogenizing” features as a unifier within ethnic communities in the American context. As Xu contends, food, involving the processes of cooking and eating, has served as a significant sign of gendering and gendered individuals. Home, the domestic space, emerges as the place where these gendered culinary practices occur, thus, creating an almost indissoluble bond between women and the domestic sphere. Lahiri’s female characters all inhabit the domestic sphere in the stories studied here. In “Mrs. Sen’s,” the narrator details

the Indian food that the South Asian immigrant loves preparing and cooking, with Eliot as her only observer. There are numerous and detailed descriptions of the vegetables she cuts, with her unique blade brought from India, and how she prepares her food in the Bengali way. The language of food, as Gardaphé and Xu claim, is significantly present in multi-ethnic literatures, as food “can portray identity, crises, create usable histories to establish ancestral connections, subvert ideology and practices of assimilation, and critique global capitalism” (5). Thus, by carefully preparing Bengali food, Mrs. Sen is unconsciously constructing her self, her identity, not only in relation to her past but also in relation to her present, America, even in her interaction with Eliot. As the narrator describes, as Mrs. Sen is alone in America, by cooking Indian food, she happily evokes her lost homeland and community. In *Breaking Bread* (2010), Lynne Christie Anderson claims that the memory of the meals which these second and third generations of immigrants’ mothers and grandmothers used to cook for them is what makes them feel, smell, and taste like “home.” Similarly, Mrs. Sen tries to replicate India, her India, in her American home. She tries to cook the same recipes she learnt in India; still and all, it is not the same food. The different culinary practices suggest the idea of community and at the same time reinforce the feeling of displacement: “In the supermarket . . . I can never find a single fish I like” (123). Whereas in India they eat the whole fish, the “tail, the eggs, even the head” (124); here, in America, she does not even find the same fish. Her demands are culturally incommensurable. When she asks the fishmonger to keep all the parts of the fish, he thinks Mrs. Sen is keeping them for the cat, since “Americans” do not eat the whole fish, but Mrs. Sen surprises him by answering: “No cats. Only husband” (127). This scene exemplifies the cultural clash existing between these two characters in terms of culinary habits. The “American” fishmonger cannot understand how a person can eat fish heads, something culturally reserved for animals in

American society. Thus, culinary practices can mark the immigrant as the “Other,” and simultaneously, the mainstream society can interpret the Other’s different food as “exotic,” or even disgusting. The difference in the way “Americans” and Mrs. Sen eat fish establishes an invisible “line” between her and “real” America.

Xu identifies a tendency to stereotype Chinese food habits as disgusting and shocking culinary practices (8). The episode where the young Maxine expresses her repulsion for her parents culinary tastes clearly exemplifies Xu’s argument. In “Mrs. Sen’s,” the fishmonger experiences a similar feeling of revulsion towards a suggestive component in the creation of (South) Asian American subjectivities, as food separates the “racial Other” from the American society (7). Mrs. Sen is not interested in “adapting” her Bengali recipes to the American practices. Her cooking is her way of constructing her own identity and at the same time her way of striving against her assimilation into the American paradigm. Hence, food also establishes a peculiar relationship between Mrs. Sen and the public sphere; leaving the house to buy fish represents, as Eliot informs us, one of the “two moments” when Mrs. Sen is the happiest person in the world. I would go as far as to claim that Mrs. Sen is only happy outside the domestic sphere when she goes to buy fish. Neither learning to drive nor even meeting her husband after work make her feel as satisfied as buying fish. Only in that occupation does she feel “at home.” The narrator himself, Eliot, establishes a connection between the fish and the homeland/family/ethnic community when he affirms that the second thing that puts Mrs. Sen in a good mood is receiving a letter from India. Both moments of happiness share a common ground: the memory and presence of India.

The “culinary nostalgia” which imbues immigrant narratives, therefore, reconstructs food as “a palliative for dislocation . . . a chronicle of nostalgia . . . a placeholder to cement cultural exceptionalism” (Mannur 117). Food can be interpreted as the vehicle the immigrants

have in their “diasporic” existences to reconnect with their homeland and mitigate their homesickness; hence, food becomes a vehicle for cultural identity in the diaspora. Mrs. Sen’s way of proclaiming the distinctiveness of her culture in the American arena is by cooking Indian/Bengali food. In this way, Mrs. Sen replicates her “home” in India, in the American domestic sphere. The final passage when, after her car accident, Mrs. Sen prepares a plate with typical American snacks, as I mentioned in chapter 3.3, symbolizes her final surrender to a reality she had tried to avoid. The accident makes her realize that her “cultural” fight against the “American influence” is doomed to failure, as she cannot control the world outside “home.” Immigrants reproduce their homelands within the context of the domestic sphere, but “outside,” in the public space, they cannot dream any more of their imaginary homelands any more, as the inexorable American reality confronts them.

The aforementioned “peanuts and crackers” can also be interpreted as Mrs. Sen’s staging of her own rebellion against herself, since she feels impotent in her attempts to keep her domestic version of India, since “homelands,” as Rushdie has famously put it, are imaginary, unreal places the immigrant evokes within unnatural contexts. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard evokes the houses where we were born as not only the “embodiment of home, [but] also [as the] embodiment of dreams” (15). However, for Mrs. Sen, her American house is neither the epitome of home nor of her dreams. Mrs. Sen cannot dream her American house, she can just evoke her home back in India. Again, the immigrant searches for a “comfort zone” in America, where she can forge her own distinctive identity, and also express her culture through the food she prepares. In “Mrs. Sen’s,” food also becomes a safe haven, a refuge where the protagonist can hide and feel secure when the American reality makes it difficult for her to find safety.

In “Hell-Heaven,” food equally serves as the gendering sign that confines Aparna to the domestic sphere. In contrast with Mrs. Sen’s pleased recreation, Aparna’s act of cooking is described as a mere obligation by her daughter. According to the narrator, her mother cooks because it is “[h]er only job, every day . . . to clean and cook for my father and me” (77). The only time it is suggested that she enjoys cooking Bengali food is when she does so for her beloved Pranab, when she anticipates “the snacks she would serve him” (62). Thereby, we find a woman whose “space” is the domestic one, like many other female characters depicted by South Asian women writers, but, unlike Mrs. Sen or Mala, she needs to escape from this domestic prison to be her “self.” However, food for Aparna also signifies her “homeland” and identity. When she has Deborah, Pranab’s wife, as a guest, she complains of “having to make the food less spicy . . . and feeling embarrassed to put a fried fish head in the dal” (68). Aparna claims her identity and self through the food that she serves the American woman who stole Pranab’s heart. Aparna voices her disappointment in her complaint about having to make her food less spicy, i.e. less Indian. She has already lost her passion, America has “stolen” it, and now she does not want to lose her “self.” While food confines Aparna and her imagination to the limits of the house, her Bengali culinary habits help her to keep her identity “safe” from a reality that has just confused and misled her with false illusions. At some point in the story, as explained in previous chapters, we think that Aparna could be another Jasmine, fleeing in search for her own happiness, but when Aparna feels she is in danger, at the point when she “loses” Pranab, she reacts by reinforcing her cultural past and traditional gender roles. Once more, Lahiri shows female characters confined to the domestic sphere and pays special attention to their reactions when they feel threatened. The difference between Mrs. Sen and Aparna lies in the fact that they engage in a different type of “quest” in America. Aparna anchors herself even more in her traditions, whereas Mrs. Sen finally

questions them. Both Mrs. Sen and Aparna end up alone, the former in her room and the latter in the backyard, as they cannot find a balance between both worlds. For these women “home” is somewhere else, but not in their “American” houses. In her continuous attempt to reconcile both “homes,” Mrs. Sen is not able to find her space; her “American” house does not give her the intimacy and support she had had in her Bengali home. As Syamala Kallury and Arijana Neira Dev contend in their article about Indian poetry, “home” has been traditionally interpreted as a “retreat, a place of solace and refuge” where individuals find their intimate space suitable for isolating themselves from the public sphere (190). In the context of immigration, the significance of “home” as a retreat from the world “outside” gains intensity, for the public space outside is identified with the “Other” culture, the new world, to which the immigrants try to adapt themselves¹²⁹.

Lahiri’s characters, Aparna and Mrs. Sen, share the same feeling of being uncomfortable in their present situations, Mrs. Sen because she wants to recreate India in her American home and Aparna because she wants to flee the domestic sphere to which she is confined. In Lahiri’s “Hell-Heaven,” the family house represents the safe space where traditions are lived and kept. Furthermore, it represents the space where Aparna dreams of having another life and becoming another self outside the walls of the house. The narrator relates how her family welcomes Pranab to their house; since the young student has rented a room in another family’s house, Aparna and her family regularly invite him to their meals, opening their house to him. The narrator feels pity for Pranab’s situation: in the American apartment he is renting, there are no memories, no imagination is allowed, either. In contrast, the family house symbolizes a communal, ethnic space where the immigrants can keep alive

¹²⁹ Mrs. Sen’s final reclusion in her bedroom has some parallels with Divakaruni’s protagonist in “Doors.” Both women retreat into the intimacy of their rooms as the ultimate space in the American house where they can find their own cultural space and maybe where they can evoke the past intimacy and feeling of safety they had experienced as children, at least in their (probably idealized) memories of childhood.

the bond with India, in their memories and imagination. When Aparna is infatuated with Pranab, she wants to leave this familiar space that is suffocating her. However, when Pranab falls in love with another woman, Aparna once more finds refuge in her house: holding on to such a communal and memory-filled space is her way of striving against her loneliness in America.

The fact that Aparna's attempt to commit suicide takes place just outside the house, in the backyard, reveals the importance of this space for this character: "she stood there, looking at our house, trying to work up the courage to strike a match" (83). Aparna observes her house, her family space from where she wants to vanish, but she cannot do it, as memories, the past, her connection with the house are sacred; they remind her of her place in the family, in the house. Clearly, Aparna does not want to mark the house with a terrible suicide. Bachelard claims that memories from "the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home" (6). Thus, Aparna does not want to damage the memories embedded in her family's house, and she chooses the backyard, a semi-public space, to commit suicide; she knows that there, in the outside world, memories will vanish. After her failed attempt to kill herself in that backyard, Aparna will continue with her everyday routine: she will go back to the kitchen to prepare the meal for the family, as if nothing had happened.

In contrast with Lahiri's female characters, Jasmine typifies the South Asian woman who subverts all patriarchal and traditional social constructions for the sake of her Dream, as we have seen in previous chapters. Most of the episodes in the novel where Jasmine is circumscribed to the domestic sphere coincide with her life in the Midwest, the quintessential, "traditional" American society. When living in Iowa, she apparently performs her domestic role to perfection, but she does not feel that the domestic sphere is her place. Jasmine does not seem to fit in the role of keeper of traditions in the domestic space, unlike

the other South Asian characters mentioned above. She is not interested in evoking India; on the contrary, she wants to forget and hide her past. Jasmine's days in the Indian ghetto just mean for her an enclosure in an artificial life. When she enters America, and, like Kali, transforms her "self" and abandons her "body," she effectively renounces her past. As I discussed previously, Jasmine's escape from Iowa and Bud represents her ultimate rejection of marriage. In fact, she refuses Bud's proposal, even when she is pregnant with his baby: "Marry me before the baby comes. Put this old bull out of his pain" (213). Marriage would enclose Jasmine in the domestic, and, as befits an adventurous Eve, she wants to continue her quest in America. Jasmine will go on looking for her "place," a personal space that has nothing to do with the domestic sphere.

As we have just seen, in the stories analyzed here, the portraits of the houses that immigrants buy or inhabit are deeply meaningful. In "The Third and Final Continent," Lahiri describes the "home" Mala and her husband finally build in America, as standing in "a tree-lined street . . . with a garden that saves us from buying tomatoes in the summer, and room for guests" (197). Ashima lies in her letters to her family in India about the comforts of her American apartment, until they finally purchase a house: "The walls of the new house are painted, the driveway sealed with pitch, the shingles and sun deck weatherproofed and stained" (51). In "Mrs. Sen's" the house significantly haunts the title as a visible absence, while Aparna's house is both heaven and hell. Some of these houses become prisons, whereas others are instrumental in claiming the family "place" in America. What these South Asian women have in common is that they all need to create a space where they can negotiate their "selves" and where they can feel part of America.

Chinese American Eves in the Domestic Space

When talking about the domestic sphere and the role of immigrant women as keepers of cultural traditions at home in America, it is interesting to consider Sucheng Chan's statement that "women can play diametrically opposite roles in cultural/ethnic transformation—sometimes they act as the motive force for change while at other times they serve as traditional culture's main conservators" (*Social and Gender Boundaries* 7). Therefore, according to Chan, Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid would represent such opposite roles. Kingston portrays Brave Orchid as the agent of transformation, as she considers her sister's attitudes out of place and time and impels her to change them. On the other hand, Moon Orchid personifies the conservative force who anchors herself to her past and holds on to a fake marriage with an absent husband. She epitomizes the role of traditional spouses who patiently wait for their husbands to come home. However, the role of "agent of transformation" that Brave Orchid embodies is "interrupted" by her "American" children, whose behavior and habits disturb her household. As a mother, Brave Orchid tries to keep the Chinese traditions at home. As a sister, Brave Orchid sees the necessity to reinterpret and to adapt Chinese cultural past to Moon Orchid's degrading situation. Thus, the distinction between the two roles that Chan establishes is not always a distinction of just two options, sometimes there is an in-between position. Brave Orchid's role as "motive force of change" is not absolute. On the one hand, she realizes some traditional aspects do not make sense in America, but, on the other, she tries to keep her cultural identity and resents the fact that her children's behavior departs from Chinese customs: "Her American children could not sit for very long. They did not understand sitting; they had wandering feet. She hoped they would

get back from the pay t.v.'s or the pay toilets or wherever they were spending their money before the plane arrived" (113). For Brave Orchid, "[H]er American children had no feelings and no memory" (115).

In this context the dialectical theory of "Necessity and Extravagance" that Sau-ling Cynthia Wong put forward in *Reading Asian American Literature* proves particularly useful, Wong maintains that these two concepts, "Necessity" and "Extravagance," signify the duality of forces operating in Asian American literature: a "contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded" force in contrast with another force "attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism" (13), echoing M. M. Bakhtin's "Rabelaisian" forces. In Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965), the Russian critic establishes a dichotomy between the popular and the official culture, the medieval church/state versus the Carnival. Thus, there is a separation between what is "popular," interpreted as everything that is unstable, open and changeable, and the opposite, the official, what is "serious, dogmatic, fixed" (Berrong 10). In Carnival time, there is a universal spirit where all hierarchies vanish and all individuals are the "same," as any social, gender or race division disappears. Bakhtin's opposition between popular and official cultures, as Berrong suggests, can be extrapolated and embrace many dichotomies: rich/poor, educated/peasant, or necessity/extravagance, as Wong proposes. This duality of forces involved in Bakhtin's concept of language reinforces the aspect of "doubleness," as a result of the encounter between two "opposites that refuse to fuse into a single one" (Benito and Manzanar, *Intercultural* 70). Thus, Bakhtin considers language as inherently dual, that is, the very nature of language, as Benito and Manzanar explain, is "hybrid," "doubled-voiced" (70). Carnival, as Bakhtin proposes, involves change and renewal, since during Carnival the individual can become someone/something else. However, this happens only during Carnival festivities, thus, there

is a pathos of change embedded in Carnival; it is the same price immigrants have to pay, the tragedy of living in between.

According to Wong, Brave Orchid's past of miseries in China creates in her the "necessity" to anticipate any "future scarcities not only in food but in other necessities of life" (28). Her "necessity" differs from the "extravagance" their children show when they prefer American hamburgers to homemade Chinese food: "she [Brave Orchid] had two shopping bags full of canned peaches, real peaches . . . enough food for everybody, though only her niece would eat with her. Her bad boy and bad girl were probably sneaking hamburgers" (113-14). Wong maintains that there is a "cultural misunderstanding" between parent and child in several other Asian American works where relationships between immigrant parents and American-born children are depicted (31). The cultural misunderstandings come from the aforementioned opposition between the forces of "Necessity" and "Extravagance": children do not feel the conservative necessity that Brave Orchid does, and they show they are open to the mainstream American culture of excessive and frivolous consumption, symbolized fast food and snacks. According to Wong, hamburgers, snacks, and "fancy food from stores and restaurants are Extravagance," as this food goes beyond "what is needed for survival" (44).

As both Xu and Wong point out, in the context of Asian American literature, food has been related to necessity and survival, features that make Chinese culinary practices different from the American ones, where food is considered as fulfilling the individual's necessities (Xu 8). From this perspective, negative stereotypes about Chinese food are partially true, as the Chinese eat many foods that are considered inedible or incompatible with the American palate, which is able and willing to waste protein and other nutrients. Chinese cuisine is thus perceived as a deviation from America's "normal pattern," which "racializes" Chinese

immigrants even more. In *The Woman Warrior*, food descriptions play a meaningful part in several passages throughout the novel, descriptions that are usually interwoven with filthy images of foods considered to be “taboo” in Western societies. Therefore, in episode like the one when Brave and Moon Orchid stroll and have lunch in Chinatown, the description of food, focalized as it is through Americanized Maxine, is deliberately unappealing to the reader: “the black quivering mass” (138).

In *Negotiating Identities*, Helena Grice also claims that the domestic space in Asian American literature is representative of its inhabitants (203). Grice maintains that, in Kingston’s fiction, houses usually reflect their occupants (218). For Moon Orchid, at first, her sister’s house represents a refuge where she can hide from a reality she does not want to face yet. When Moon Orchid arrives from Hong Kong, Brave Orchid’s house serves a practical purpose: it is a place where she can stay temporarily. After confronting Moon Orchid’s unfaithful husband, Brave Orchid leaves her sister in Los Angeles, in Moon Orchid’s daughter’s house. It is there that Moon Orchid starts to show the first symptoms of her dementia. Ghosts torment her, and even when she goes back to Brave Orchid’s house she still sees those ghosts there. In her article “Filiality and Woman’s Autobiographical Storytelling,” Sidonie Smith suggests Brave Orchid’s house metaphorically becomes a “living coffin” when Moon Orchid decides to shut all the windows and turn off the lights (73). Moon Orchid protects herself in her sister’s house, a house that has constructed her identity as the first wife (Smith 73). By shutting all the windows, Moon Orchid is enclosing herself and her family from a reality she cannot accept. Her role as wife has vanished in the same way her mind and life are also coming to an end. The darkness that surrounds Brave Orchid’s house—which becomes “gloomy; no air, no light” (158)—represents Moon Orchid’s own life and existence, a life in the shadow of her husband, forgotten and darkened.

Whereas the house epitomizes for Moon Orchid the idea of a “living coffin,” for Brave Orchid the house is the space for the family, for preserving and nurturing Chinese traditions and constructing new identities. That is why, at one point, Brave Orchid cannot take it any more and wants her sister to leave the house. Once Moon Orchid is put away in a mental asylum, Brave Orchid “open[s] up the windows and let[s] the air and light come into the house again” (159). The house goes back to its initial “peace” and order. The importance of the house full of family life reappears in “Shaman,” where a now elderly Brave Orchid tells her daughter, Maxine: “There’s only one thing that I really want anymore. I want you here, not wandering like a ghost from Romany. I want every one of you living here together. When you’re all home, all six of you with your children and husbands and wives . . . I’m happy. . . . That’s the way a house should be” (108). The house becomes a reflection of Brave Orchid’s dreams, as she conceives the house as the space where she can preserve family harmony, a space where new identities are always constructed by negotiating competing cultural traditions, and fighting the ghosts that have haunted women in Brave Orchid’s family.

The narrative of house and Home acquires an even more ambivalent meaning in *Typical American*. On the one hand, “home” is envisioned as the safe domestic space where the Chinese family feels “at home,” and on the other, home serves as the expression of the “capitalistic narrative of home buying” (Lee 49), embedded in the economic version of the American Dream. However, as Lee argues, the Changs conceive their house not as “home” but as a “house” that serves to develop their Dream. Ralph considers himself the center of the household, where women must “obey” and do as he “commands.” In “his” household, at least initially, Helen and Theresa are those who serve Ralph and help to realize his masculine Dream. However, the Changs’ “home” has many “cracks.” The first house they inhabited

when Helen and Ralph got married had even been a literal hazard for the family, as they observe when they pass by: “That corner of their building with the crack had actually fallen off, exposing a cutaway section not only of their old back bedroom, but their living room too” (133). Significantly enough, their fabulous new house in the suburbs also falls apart as a metaphor of the Changs’ Dream, thus reinforcing the allegorical reading of their life as an American Dream gone awry. Their grotesque Dream without foundations silently crumbles, echoing Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, where the building mirrors its inhabitants’ fate. In the same way that the Usher twins’ corrupted relationship is reflected in the fall of their house, Ralph’s unscrupulous dream is symbolized in the decaying house and business. Ralph’s chicken fried restaurant falls apart as his life does: “the chicken palace has developed several fresh, fine cracks” (242). The family continue with their business, trying to hide the fissures of a dream that is coming to an end: “They fixed the cracks themselves. . . . Did you notice? That pain-in-the-neck settling’s back again. . . . I’ve never seen a building with such a *settling problem*,” exclaims Ralph in a highly resonant pun (243; emphasis mine). The corruption that has made Grover’s dream collapse eventually threatens Ralph’s life too. The restaurant’s fissures represent the corruption already present in its pillars, in Ralph, Theresa and Helen’s amoral relationships, at least from Ralph’s ethical perspective. Lee observes how the “purchasing of a house” emphasizes the male position as a “hero” in a narrative where women act as the “homemakers” (54). In *Typical American* the home is not depicted as the Changs’ safe domestic space where they can evolve and re-negotiate their “selves”; on the contrary, it emerges as a space of struggle, where the female members of the family try to vindicate their “selves” in Ralph’s masculine discourse.

The act of buying a house, beyond the capitalistic meaning Lee suggests, signifies the way the immigrant attaches him/her “self” to America, as the country where she/he intends to

live and create her/his “home” away from her/his homeland. This space comes to be their “place,” following Yi-Fu Tuan’s theory of space and place, when this space projects their experiences, and they project their emotions on it. This emotional tie to a place differentiates the place from the “affectless” space outside. However, both space and place need each other and require each other for definition, as Tuan maintains (6). We could not conceive a place without the existence of a space. “Space is freedom,” argues Tuan; the freedom that allows immigrants to “dream” and get tied to a “place.” Bachelard, in his analysis of the relation between individuals and different spaces, contends that memory and imagination actively interplay in order to create a “community of memory and language” (5). Memories from the past nurture houses and places that we feel belong to us. It is precisely at this moment that a space becomes a place, echoing Tuan’s theory.

The special relation between places and individuals is what shapes the poetics of space, where dreams constitute a significant element. In the narratives examined here, immigrants dream about what America means for them, their expectations for the future and, also, the spaces they want to inhabit: spaces, places, houses that frame their dreams, sometimes even mirroring them, as in *Typical American*.

Therefore, as the title of this chapter suggests, America and its promise of freedom and happiness—two of the main dreams immigrants have aspired to obtain for centuries when they come to America—can turn into a “barbed wire” prison for some immigrant women, whose life in America is reduced to the domestic sphere, where they try to live “safe” but “boring” lives with their memories of their home countries. As Rushdie states in *Imaginary Homelands*, this recreation of the home country in America is usually too forced; the diasporic Indian writer, in this case in America, recreates the India that resides in her/his mind, not the real India. The immigrant characters in these Asian American narratives all

create “imaginary” Indias and Chinas in their domestic spaces, artificial spaces recreated in the past: “Their image of India [or China] is frozen in the year they left the old country” (*Conversations* 44). Furthermore, in some cases, this is complicated by the fact that these women are further burdened with the responsibility of keeping their traditions away from their homelands.

3.6. (South) Asian American Eyes: Racialized Bodies

Our bodies differentiate us. On some occasions, they even mark us as “the Other.” In *Fault Lines* Meena Alexander remembers how she had to give a reading once and, as she was wont to do, she chose to wear a sari. Alexander describes the enthusiastic reaction of another colleague after her lecture in terms of “her looks”; he said “You really took my breath away,” and he continued, ““Yes, really, you look so . . .” He stops. ‘Well, you know, dressed in a sari and all that’” (188). This episode that Alexander recounts reveals the importance of the body and the physical appearance of the “Other” in order to look “credible” in the eyes of the “non-Others.” The other poet was delighted with Alexander’s reading because she was reading it dressed as “an Indian woman.”¹³⁰ In other words, Alexander’s identity was interpreted within a blatantly Orientalist framework. Alexander’s example also typifies the discourse where the “Other” is also a “gendered Other.” In the case of Asian American women, as Su-lin Yu claims, the perception of their “gendered and ethnic identity in the Western symbolic” fueled the “Orientalist fantasy and desire for the Oriental other” (“Orientalist Fantasy” 69). Hence, Alexander is construed as the “Oriental Other,” not only because of her Indian dress, but because of her gendered and racialized body. At the same time, I consider that, in this passage, Alexander’s anecdote also exemplifies Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness,” which, as reinterpreted by Simal, represents the duality embedded in the process of identity construction: “others construct a self for you,” but,

130 This anecdote exemplifies what David Simpson calls “azza” sentences (from “speaking as a . . .”) which, according to Jeffrey Gray, usually corresponds to a paragraph where the writer presents some autobiographical details that work as identity “markers” (21). As Gray cogently argues, these “azza” paragraphs function like declarations of intention which serve to locate the author within a specific group and, at the same time, anticipate the author’s position for the reader. By means of the “azza statement” quoted above, Alexander is revealing to the reader her “authority” in terms of ethnicity. Her personal experiences allow her to authenticate her position within the parameters of ethnicity.

concomitantly, in the process of migration you inevitably “unself yourself,” at the same time that you are “forced to invent your self anew” (“Moving Selves” 155). However, as Alexander proclaims in *Poetics of Dislocation*, the body can never be forgotten; the woman poet needs to create and invent a form that survives the borders, racial and sexual, which the body must cross (81). Words cannot obliterate one’s body; hence, we cannot obviate our bodies. As Alexander claims, the body marks the immigrant so that (s)he feels and becomes the “Other”: the “borders” Anzaldúa writes of are here reinterpreted as the borders that the body itself establishes: Thus, female bodies become the site for “unquiet borders” (81).

“We were defined and identified by the way we were seen” (139), says a character in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981). This quotation very much sums up the reality portrayed in these narratives, where the (South) Asian American characters are defined by their “racialized” bodies, and their bodies make them different from white America, and secondarily African Americans. It is necessary, however, to clarify the relationship of “race” to the idea of a “racialized body” and to distinguish the two. As discussed when establishing the boundaries between “race” and “ethnicity” in chapter 2.4, “race” has been a ubiquitous element in the history of America, and consequently, in the very notion of the American Dream. The aforementioned James T. Adams claimed that the “superiority” of the English in “their” “epic of America” led to their refusal to mix with other (“inferior”) races in order to maintain their “racial pride” and purity (206). Black slaves and the “red man” were regarded either as “domestic animals” or, in the case of the latter, as a “wild beast of the forest to be exploited or exterminated” (Adams 206). Therefore, for many centuries, the mythology of “race” has circumscribed the “destinies” or “fates” of many human beings in the history of America.

One of the most recurrent themes in immigrant narratives refers to the difficulties the immigrants have to grapple with because of their skin color. In a country which has been created by those “white” men who fought to ensure the “white” Dream, “racialized bodies” emerge as intricate “barriers.” In contrast with the “non-ethnic” immigrants, the “ethnic” ones did not “start from a blank page position, their body [was] not a *tabula rasa* in which to inscribe any chosen identity” (Simal, “Moving” 155). As discussed before, Alexander points out how the body itself establishes our place in society, since it is what determines our identity (157). In *The Melancholy of Race*, as Anne Anlin Cheng explores what Sollors describes as “Indian Melancholy,” that is, how the “white” dominant culture is the one which “romanticizes and naturalizes” the first Others, Native Americans (14). “Indian melancholy” was just a rhetorical device used by the dominant white class in order to get the approval and validation for their genocidal acts in the new world (123). Thus, the “subjectivization of racial domination,” as Cheng cogently argues, encourages the construction of the “racialized body” (107). It is the “white gaze,” according to Fanon, which undermines and determines the colonized body, turning it into a “racialized body” (95). However, there is a difference between the idea of the “racialized body” and the concept of “race” which, according to Fanon, determines the individual. It is not race but the racial inscription that the immigrant body undergoes within the context of a mainstream society that marks him/her as a racialized being. Furthermore, in the context of migrations, race is not only constructed in relation to white, but also “alongside [other] racialized bodies” (Housel 50). Race involves a continuous negotiation of identities, hence, it cannot be considered unidirectional any more. Yet, the racialized body emerges as a barrier for many immigrants, like it or not.¹³¹ As intend to prove

¹³¹ In contrast with Fanon’s “epidermalization” theory, based on skin color as the means to categorize bodies, in *Against Race*, Gilroy moves further, claiming that the “body,” according to some scientific and technological paradigms, is much more than the color of the skin (51).

in the following pages, the impact of the visible “racialized body” is still very much present in these contemporary narratives and functions as a distinctive feature that, as Alexander’s “azza” anecdote demonstrates, predisposes “unmarked” individuals who see/read such a “distinct” person to mark him/her as the “racialized ethnic other.”

“In the American Society”

As we have already discussed, the party by the swimming pool in Jen’s “In the American Society” constitutes a pivotal episode, which underscores the cultural clash between the Changs and the Anglo-American guest at the party. The people at this party do not meet and mix as equals, for the shadow of the “racialized body” still haunts in their minds. On the one hand, there is the myth of the egalitarian American society, where, *a priori*, there are no differences between the Changs and the other people at the party, but, on the other hand, the “racialized body” marks the Chinese family as different. The difference is “visible.” The scene at the swimming-pool party reflects the social barriers this Chinese family faces when trying to become an American(-ized) family. The “colonial encounter” between the “white” host and the “racialized Other” prompts a passage where stereotyping plays back and forth. The Changs’ bodies are seen as barriers, lines that separate them from the other guests in the party. They cannot behave as the other Americans do in the party, because they do not know what the “proper” behavior in this type of situation is. Lee insightfully claims that “through the Changs’ prodigious copying of American behavior, Jen questions the American myth of a raceless society” (*Americas* 48). The Changs can have money, they can even have some Anglo-American acquaintances and go to a “typical American” party; however, in the end, they cannot get over their racialized bodies and what

this implies. Bhabha's famous parallel affirmations, "[a]lmost the same but not quite" (*Location of Culture* 127), "almost the same but not white" (138), illustrate the Changs' situation. They can imitate and copy what is "typical American," but they will never become "Yankees," as they will always be "seen" as the Chinese version of "Yankees": "Chang-kees."

In her analysis of Jen's work, Lee proposes a reading of the Changs' behavior from the perspective of that "colonial" figure of "mimicry."¹³² Lee maintains that the Changs try to emulate and copy what they consider to be "typical American" and in doing so they "imitate" certain "typical American" patterns such as buying a house with a backyard in the suburbs, becoming an entrepreneur, having a dog, or purchasing a car: "Seems like someone's becoming one-hundred-percent Americanized" (128). As Lee argues, Ralph conceives "being American" as an easy role to play, in such a way that he can even modulate the "degree" of his—and his family's—"Americanization," for Ralph does not want to become completely "Americanized."¹³³ This desire to act like an American, as Lee suggests, is reminiscent of Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," that involves being "almost the same" but, not quite/white American. At the party, the Changs think will transcend their "racialized bodies" by copying the Americans: they try to please their literal and metaphorical hosts by "imitating" behavior they consider to be "typical American." Lee points out the "slippage" one can find in the Changs' mimicry of the American behavior. Bhabha's concept of "slippage" involves a "not-identicalness" and, in the case of the Changs, they interpret the ability to copy as something

¹³² In *Homi K. Bhabha*, David Huddart claims that mimicry as Bhabha formulates it, that is, as an exaggerated copying of manners, language, or ideas, is also a form of mockery (39). But, mockery is also a way of distinguishing between who is in the mainstream and who is the Other, hence, the mainstream has the "power to name and regulate appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Ono and Pham 103). Mockery is another way of showing the inequalities existing within the society.

¹³³ Ralph admits he does not want to become completely "American," but, what he does not know but will realize at the end of the novel, is that he can never become a fully American, at least in the eyes of other Americans. Ralph confesses he does not want to be wholly American, as "typical American" is "no-good" (67). Ralph wants to keep his Chinese past and traditions.

“donned that is other than one’s self” (Lee 64). The slippage makes the colonial subject a “partial presence,” that is, according to Bhabha, “incomplete and virtual” (Bhabha 123). In the end, mimicry does not hide the Changs’ “racialized bodies”; on the contrary, as Jen satirically depicts, it foregrounds their difference; it makes the Changs feel like fools playing a “role” that turns out to be acquired. What lies beneath the Changs’ “acting American” is Jen’s critique of the American Dream. The story reminds the reader that “being typical American” is a role that you can play but, at the end, it is the “body” that distinguishes and characterizes the individual in the eyes of the rest, rendering him/her “more or less American.”

On the other hand, according to Bhabha, the repetition of the same acts of stereotyping creates some doubt in the stereotyper, in this case the “white” American host. In such a situation, the stereotyper must convince him/herself of the truthfulness of the stereotype. Mimicry distorts the stereotyper’s image (129). Mimicry implies some repetition is needed to preserve “authenticity,” an act of mimicry that, ironically, results in a partial representation. Mr. Chang’s attempt to imitate and copy “American behavior” during the party only evinces the existence of a gap and confrontation between the patriarch of the Chinese family and the American guests of the party. Ralph wears a suit, thinking that it is the suitable attire for a country-club party in America, but he is the only guest wearing a suit at a swimming-pool party. He is so ridiculously overdressed that, instead of “passing” for another American guest, Ralph’s “inappropriate” clothes make him stand out. Thus, he unwittingly becomes an easy target for Jeremy, who mistakes Ralph for an intruder. The American man is so uncertain of Ralph’s identity that he needs that Mrs. Lardner tells him who that Chinese man is. Consequently, once Ralph is confirmed to be a guest at the party, Jeremy does not know how to approach the man he has just insulted. Ralph’s attempt to “imitate” the

American code results in a distortion and parody in the eyes of the “stereotyper.” In Jen’s story, Ralph’s mimicry does not help him overcome the visible frontier of his body. Instead, Mr. Chang’s “racialized” body establishes a distance between him and the other “white” guests, and triggers off a reaction full of prejudiced stereotypes about Asians. Again, the body difference, as Alexander claims, arises as an invisible barrier that constrains the immigrants’ integration in the host society. As Simal argues, the non-immigrant Other’s social constructs—so rooted in America’s identity and core—threaten to become an obstacle for the immigrants’ own desire to build or keep their own identity in relation to those social constructs established by the “very people who first posed the questions” (155). The “white” host views Ralph as the “Other” in the binary opposition; Ralph is construed by Jeremy as the “Other.” Despite his (flawed, partial) act of “mimicry,” Ralph is inevitably construed as a threat by the “real” American, who immediately requests an explanation of what this Chinese man is doing in his party. Thus, to some extent, the critical aspect of mimicry vanishes here since, at the end, it cannot erode the colonial gaze.

In the multiethnic mosaic that America has become, “the racial frontier of the body” still stigmatizes the immigrant and his/her freedom to be his/her “self.” Jen’s satire of the traditional American Dream subverts all the gendered and racial foundations embedded in the Dream itself.

Two South Asian American Eves and their “Racialized Bodies”

In Lahiri’s homonymous story, Mrs. Sen similarly faces certain embarrassing or difficult situations because of her physical distinctiveness. The scene on the bus is a clear illustration of the existence of some kind of barrier between Mrs. Sen, or rather, the

“Indianness of her body,” and the bus driver, whom we presume not to be an immigrant or racialized. Mannur claims that the bus driver speaks to Eliot as if Mrs. Sen did not exist, “reminding her of her status as a racialized outsider” (64). I would go further and argue that the question the bus driver asks Mrs. Sen: “Can you speak English?” already establishes a distance between them. The bus driver immediately assumes that she cannot speak English, as she does not look “white.” Once more, the “racialized body” makes Mrs. Sen different from the rest of the bus passengers, it marks her as not belonging to “mainstream” America. Her body identifies her as different, as “non-white.” The other presumably non-ethnic passengers on the bus—a couple of college students and, especially, an old woman who, as Eliot informs us, keeps watching Mrs. Sen during the whole route—are suspicious of Mrs. Sen’s bag’s contents. The scene reinforces the idea of the body as a barrier that brands Mrs. Sen as different, rendering her bag’s contents threatening or, at the very least, mysteriously disturbing¹³⁴.

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist’s “foreignness” and her “unfamiliar body” guide her life after she arrives in America. Her rape, which takes place as soon as she sets foot in the new world, represents an “epiphanic” moment of revelation which fosters Jasmine’s self-transformation: “My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for” (121). Once her body has been “corrupted” after the rape, she needs a “rebirth” that will allow her to discard that “inessential” body. Initially, in *Jasmine* the body seems to be peripheral to the character’s transformation in America, as transpires from the narrator’s remarks quoted above. However, the “racialized perspective” will emerge and subvert Jasmine’s initial quest, so that her “difference” as a South Asian woman will eventually mark her relationship with the other(s). In *Days and Nights in Calcutta*,

134 The smell of the fish Mrs. Sen carries in her bag perturbs the rest of the passengers in the bus. Food contributes to the already existing barrier between Mrs. Sen and the other non-South Asian people (section 3.4).

Mukherjee claims that the “rebirth” into a new culture encompasses a “repudiation of the previous avatars” (179). In such a process, the body is inessential, it is “merely a shell,” which allows the self to transform and be reborn several times. I agree with Mukherjee’s conceiving the body as a peripheral element in the immigrant’s transformation, since, in the process of “un-selving the selves” that Jasmine undergoes, she needs to abandon the body that marks her as distinct, as Jasmine, the girl from India. However, during the process of transformation that Jasmine goes through, her physical body is always present, and whereas the body seems to be inessential for her, it is not for the other characters she encounters in America. Even if the body is merely a “shell” for Jasmine, it is certainly a shell that will remain visible to others throughout her self-transformation.¹³⁵

Mukherjee’s vision of the American Dream in *Jasmine* is personal and exceptional in the panorama of immigrant literary tradition. Mukherjee portrays a South Asian female character who obviously has a different “body,” and in her Indian body she travels in search of her dream. She cannot abandon her body. Mukherjee’s novel is in some ways similar to Jen’s *Typical American*: both criticize America and its naïveté, as is suggested by the simplicity of the American characters who do not see beyond Jasmine’s “racialized body.” In *Jasmine* Mukherjee portrays a “mainstream” American society full of “racist” stereotypes that mark the protagonist as the “racialized Other.” As Mukherjee claims of her own experience, “[i]n a life of many cultural moves, I had clung to my uniqueness as the source of confidence and stability” (*Days and Nights* 180). The author herself vindicates her distinctive body as what remains unchangeable in her cross-cultural movements. The body which symbolizes her “self” is also the body which is “seen” as a barrier by the non-ethnic other.

135 In fact, Jasmine is conscious of her mysteriously “different” body despite her initial intuition. There has been much criticism of Mukherjee’s use of Jasmine’s “exoticism” in the novel. In *Locating Race*, Malini Johar Schueller maintains that Jasmine’s mobility depends on her personification of the “Orientalist stereotype” (94). Schueller affirms that Jasmine takes advantage of her distinctiveness. I argue the opposite.

Jasmine evolves throughout the novel, but her “racialized body” continues the same during her journey: “Jyoti would have saved. But Jyoti was now a *sati*-goddess. . . . Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijn & Wife [sic]. Jase went to movies and lived for today” (176). The different selves Jasmine transforms “herself” into all have the same “racialized body” that makes her inscrutable. Nevertheless, though her “racialized body” is the same before the eyes of the the “real” Americans, Jasmine’s body undergoes a change while she is pregnant. If we look to Cristina Mazzoni’s theory “maternal impressions,” the maternal belief that the baby/fetus can feel the mother’s “desires, fears, experiences” (ix), Jasmine’s final decision to leave behind her life with Bud can be seen a consequence of her pregnancy. Jasmine wants something real, or at least, something better for the future life she is carrying. In *Immigrant Women*, Maxine Seller argues about pregnancy in immigrant women as their way of feeling a stronger link with the new country (5). Jasmine could walk and talk like an American, but her “racialized” body was always a barrier in her “Americanization.” However, pregnancy gives Jasmine hope, the hope that America will embrace both her and her American baby. Now that she is pregnant, Jasmine does not need to live a life in which she was not happy, and she finally leaves everything in order to look for the promise of a better life, looking for the well-being of her “body.”

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee does not want to portray a “victim” from the Third World caught in the American Dream/Nightmare; Jasmine knows what she is doing and she is conscious of her “racialized body,” and also of how Americans consider her different; yet, she moves on, renegotiating her identity over and over again. Mukherjee gives a new dimension to the “racialized body” theory, providing it with the force necessary to promote the immigrant’s self-transformation.

3.7. (South) Asian American Eves: Changing “Selves”

One night America quietly seeps in and takes hold of one’s mind and body, and the Vietnamese soul of sorrows slowly fades away. In the morning the Vietnamese American speaks a new language of materialism. . . .

Andrew Lam

In *Perfume Dreams*, Andrew Lam explores his identity as a “Viet Kieu,” a Vietnamese living in America. In the passage quoted above, he articulates the process of self-transformation that immigrants undergo after coming to the United States. There is a rebirth of the Vietnamese self resulting in another self, another subjectivity, which would never resemble the first one. This process of self-transformation the immigrant undergoes is also addressed by Alexander in *The Shock of Arrival*, where the South Asian American writer scrutinizes the complexities embedded in this passage. Alexander declares that “there are many souls, many voices in one dark body” (2), recognizing that her “evolving selves” have possibly multiplied in her journey to become a South Asian American “self.” “The shock of arrival” in America not only dismantles the poet’s identity, but also triggers off an unceasing process of “self-transformation.” As Simal argues in “Moving selves,” the common ground all immigrants share is the “process of re-creation that migration brings about” (154). As the immigrant inhabits that diasporic “in-between” space, his/her identity and self are also the product of that “in-betweenness.” Consequently, the pursuit of the Dream entails manifold “re-fashionings” and “re-creations” in the immigrant self, a self that will no longer resemble the original one.

The issue of self-transformation is intrinsically connected with the literary genre known as *Bildungsroman*, which embraces stories of the growth of the individual from youth to maturity. Øyunn Hestetun finds the *Bildungsroman* pattern in traditional immigrant narratives, as most follow the structures of “ethnic passage,” in order to describe the immigrant’s “coming-of-age” (83). However, as Hestetun affirms, the difference between the traditional European *Bildungsroman* genre and its interpretation in immigrant discourses is the absence of that lineal process from youth to adulthood of the earlier in favor of a conception of the immigrant’s life as an ongoing process of self-transformation (88). In this discussion about the differences between the “white” American *Bildungsroman* and immigrant *Bildungsroman*, it is necessary to refer to Boelhower’s study of the genre. In *Immigrant Autobiography* he traces the relationship between ethnic autobiographies and the *Bildungsroman*. In addition, Boelhower contends that, whereas in the traditional American autobiography this process is “unidirectional,” in the immigrant version the journey to selfhood is more complex, as the immigrant has to deal with two different cultural systems: “a culture of the present and future [as in the traditional narratives], and a culture of memory [the past]” (29)¹³⁶. This non-unidirectional idea matches with Hestetun’s insistence on the absence of a straight process in immigrant autobiographies. In “We, Too, Sing America,” Brenda Smith contends that the tension existing between old and new cultures represents a “psychical dilemma” for immigrants, as they must find a way of harmonizing them in order to construct their American subjectivities (101). As Lam voices in the aforementioned *Perfumed Dreams*, America enters his mind and body which will never be Vietnamese again as a new subjectivity is born, that of a the Vietnamese American, another self who speaks a

¹³⁶ Sau-ling Cynthia Wong convincingly accuses Boelhower’s idea of immigrant autobiography of being just a “genotype of American autobiography” (24). Wong states the necessity to remember that Asian and European immigrant experiences were not the same and thus the different immigration models are also evinced in the immigrant autobiographies (159).

different language. The construction of a new self entails facing the dilemma of acquiring something at the expense of something else.

“I, too, am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion . . . that something can also be gained,” claims the narrator of Rushdie’s *Shame* (206). The crisscrossing pattern embedded in the process of immigration, where two cultures are confronted, involves the idea of translation from one culture to another, as Rushdie’s narrator claims. Thus, something is gained but, concomitantly, as Lam mentioned above, something is lost. Like Alexander, Mukherjee and other “diasporic” Indian writers, Rushdie articulates the ambiguity involved in the process of “becoming,” of “shifting” between cultures. It is an uncertainty that is never determined or resolved, as the works analyzed here show. In my opinion this active process of self-transformation, along with the reality and imagination of living in-between, is translated into these stories which never achieve closure, where characters still look for their “place,” “self” and dream at the end of the narratives. It is my intention to scrutinize such immigrant characters to trace the development of their “selves,” still in progress.

Jasmine: Naming Identities

In her 2004 article, Mukherjee proclaimed that “[t]he price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation” (“Two Ways to Belong” 274). Mukherjee turns *Jasmine* into the paradigm of immigrant self-transformation. The story of *Jasmine* is the story of an incessant journey from a poor life in Hasnapur to America, a journey crowded with different situations and places which have nurtured *Jasmine*’s “self-transformation,” a “re-birth,” “both terrible and wonderful,” as Sant-Wade

and Radell maintain, because the immigrant cannot go back to her/his original state (12). In “A World Apart” (1998), Ruth Yu Hsiao contends that “[a] journey is often associated with the birth of a new, American self” (227). In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Sollors also relates the “journey motif” with the “rebirth of an American self.” Sollors maintains that Puritanism imbued the transatlantic crossings with “a systematic religious symbolism, and new-world destiny” (41). Sollors argues that the figure of the American “new man”—the “American Adam”—is always associated with the motif of the journey, the “exodus” (43). When analyzing Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, Sollors points out the relevance of the image that symbolizes the “rebirth of immigrants as American infants, sequentially shown in the stages of transatlantic journey” (76). As discussed in the introductory chapter, America was conceived by those from Europe, Africa and Asia as a New World, thus, the journey to this new Eden involved a parallel passage in terms of the individual’s identity. Innocence emerges as a crucial aspect in this process, the innocence necessary to start from a blank slate, like Crèvecoeur’s American infants.

In Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, her journey to “discover” America also involves a passage of “self-discovery,” a transformation in Jasmine’s identity. Jasmine has “re-invented” her “self” several times in order to survive in America. As Alexander claims “What could it mean to an Indian from Asia to live and breathe and move in America? To make up a self in America? . . . To make a new life, a life in the ordinary world, facing daylight” (143). How could Jasmine feel when she arrives in America? When the immigrant lives in another country, how can he/she be South Asian and live as an American? Obviously, the immigrant

in America is no longer the same person who left his/her homeland. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist's self-transformation is conveyed in her change of names.¹³⁷

To some extent, names do serve as an indicator of the individuals' distinctive character and thus, of their identity. In immigrants, the names could represent a "barrier" in their integration in the mainstream society, "condemning" them to ostracism as the "other." Names can be "carriers" of the individual's identity and fate, as was the case of Gogol, in Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Names can also be "barriers" which prevent the uncovering or else threaten to unveil hidden past identities. In Jasmine's case, her changes of name also convey her different selves. She is called Jasmine by her late husband, in an attempt to make the old Jyoti more "westernized," escaping from the traditional Indian social structures. Then, Jane appears as the ultimate "Americanized" Jasmine, when she embraces the traditional Midwest America. However, Jasmine's different names do not change her "racialized body," which remains fixed. She is conscious of her "differentness" but she does not mind, she uses her "exoticism" to move ahead. However, according to some critics, the fact that the name change is always given by Jasmine's new partner proves problematic. Grewal contends that the forced transformation Jasmine undergoes throughout the novel reinforces the idea of Jasmine as a subaltern. However, this image is at odds with the idea of Jasmine as a new American Eve, a self-made woman, who voluntarily sets off in search of her own self. In my opinion, the change of names in *Jasmine* is not coerced by her partners¹³⁸. The several names

137 Joan Chiung-huei Chang claims that, for Chinese immigrants, there is a history of "name-change" when they come to America; because they think that is the best way to assimilate to the American society: "An American name, not one's life per se, thus becomes a vehicle that decides one's existence in American society, an advantage that a Chinese name lacks" (75). Chinese immigrants change their original names for more "American" ones in order to find a niche in American society, as if names were identity cards that could represent the individuals.

138 Nishimura contends that Jasmine plays the role of an "observer" of the life and people surrounding her. Jasmine's "distinct body" empowers her to carry on with her quest. Mukherjee hints at the naïveté of the American men that Jasmine meets in her journey, men who are able to leave their pasts behind just for the "unfamiliarity" that Jasmine embodies. Bud leaves his wife, Taylor his life in New York.

Jasmine acquires are indicators of the process she is undergoing. Every time she is with a different partner, she changes her name because her “self” is undergoing such a transformation that she needs a distinct name that reflects this change, not because her partners choose it for her, but because Jasmine feels is the best “identity card” that can mirror her self-transformation. In fact, Jasmine embodies the fight against impositions, and this “shuttling between identities” (Hoppe 144) is her way of escaping from her immediate past and moving forward. As Ruppel maintains, transformation in Jasmine embodies an “ethic of survival”: Jasmine transforms herself in order to move on, recovering from the obstacles she confronts during her wandering. The end of the novel suggests a continuation of her journey towards an open horizon, not a frontier, where she will probably transform her “self” once more.

This “ethic of survival” –moving beyond terrible episodes and struggling to find a place in society— is reminiscent in some ways of the seventeenth-century picaresque formula. Walter Göbel put forward this association in his article about Bharati Mukherjee, “Bharati Mukherjee: Expatriation, Americanality and Literary Form,” though he contends that *Jasmine*’s ceaseless self-transformation, personified in her name changing, goes beyond the picaresque formula, as in *Jasmine* there is a completely obliteration of the previous selves, since it creates a kind of discontinuity that is also reflected in the continuous flashbacks in the narrative (114). Nevertheless, Jasmine could be construed as a new South Asian “pícaro” if we follow the classic approach to the Spanish picaresque.¹³⁹ As is well-known, the essence of the picaresque lies in the fact that a “man” from a low social stratum is

139 According to David Mañero-Lozano’s study, “Towards a Picaresque Novel Review,” the origins of the picaresque novel can be traced back to the period 1599-1604. In *Sobre la Novela Picaresca y Otros Escritos*, Tierno Galván discusses the “pícaro” and how the pícaro intends to rise in society from the lowest poor condition. When the pícaro attains that position, he/she never wants to go back to the past life of scarcity (23). For more on the picaresque genre, see Fernando Lázaro Carreter, *Lazarillo de Tormes en la Picaresca*, or Francisco Rico’s *La Novela Picaresca y el Punto de Vista*, and F. Cabo Aseguinolaza’s *El Concepto de Género y la Literatura Picaresca*, among others.

able to write “the book of his life” (Miguez-Arranz 81). In Mukherjee’s novel, Jasmine is presented as the first-person narrator of her own life; similarly, as Francisco Rico reminds us, the picaresque always takes the shape of a fictional autobiography. And, like the classic pícaro/a, Jasmine will try to survive and rise above her initially appalling circumstances, and she will do so thanks to her wits. Thus, we can consider *Jasmine* a contemporary immigrant variation of the old pícaro/a, a new approach where identity and the “shock of arrival” constitute the struggle of the South Asian “picara” in the new world.

In *Jasmine* there is a second character who experiences the self-transformation embedded in the transnational and diasporic quest: Du, the Vietnamese boy that Jasmine and Bud have adopted. Both characters, Jasmine and Du, have faced the “shock of arrival” and the shaping of new identities in their coming to America. However, Mukherjee differentiates their experiences when the narrator points out that her “transformation was genetic, Du’s was hyphenated” (222). This comment corroborates Jasmine’s ongoing process of transformation where the old selves are sloughed and forgotten, whereas Du’s transformation entails that selves be “held in suspension,” as Cristina Emanuela Dascalu claims in *Imaginary Homelands of Writers in Exile*. Du is a “hybrid,” like the artifacts he creates; a mixture of different components. Dascalu contends that, by giving both characters, Jasmine and Du, a slightly different view about themselves, Mukherjee is reaffirming the idea that there are as many (imaginary) selves as homelands and, I would add, as Americas. Du’s decision to go West and join his sister prompts Jasmine’s own journey. Neither of them has found a place; their transformation is still in progress, imagining and constructing new subjectivities in their imagined America.

The fluidity of Jasmine’s “self” is also the fluidity of America. As we shall see in the next section, Jasmine is not the only character that undergoes a continuous transformation in

this novel. America also changes. That is why the novel itself lacks closure, because it serves as a potent metaphor for both protagonists, Jasmine and America. When *Jasmine* ends without a closure leaving the readers in the dark about future developments in the protagonist's life, it also suggests that something is left unfinished in the other silent protagonist of this novel: America. *Jasmine* recreates the old pioneers' American Dream by retelling the story of a South Asian American Eve in search of her Dream. America is envisioned in this novel with both its positive and negative aspects. It is portrayed as the fallen paradise, when Jasmine first set foot on its soil, as a myriad of ghettos in New York, and ultimately, as the promise of a better future. America is fluid because its immigrants make it so. The fluctuation of names coincides with the change of places and peoples Jasmine meets in her journey from India to America. Thus, Ludwig's claim that Jasmine defines her "self" in accordance with her partners, and each one gives her a different name (106), may not be totally accurate. In my opinion, Jasmine re-negotiates "her-self/selves" and she is the one who chooses when she must leave behind her past "self" of Jyoti or Jane. Nobody can decide for her. As I have intended to prove in earlier sections, this "re-invention of one's self" is closely linked with the notion of the "Borderlands." It is in this borderland where there are cultural crossings and the immigrant has to "re-fashion" her "self" in order to adapt to America's changeable situation. "Borderlands," after all, are fluid spaces, never static, so they require immigrants to adapt their "selves" to that fluidity.

Lahiri's Female Characters: Crisscrossing Identities

The female characters in Lahiri's fiction also undergo a process of self-transformation that any cross-cultural and/or transnational passage entails. These women have all embarked

on a journey with America as their final destination; a journey conceived and promoted by their husbands. Lahiri's female characters, unlike Jasmine, do not take an individual path to attain their personal Dreams. They envisage their "silent" Dreams in the domestic sphere and in the letters they send home.

In "The Borderlands of Identity and a B-side to the Self," Leah Harte explores the relation between geographical and metaphorical borders in Lahiri's short stories. She contends that an element that Lahiri's narratives share is the multiplicity of identities that emerge from the geographical border crossing. As I have already discussed, Border(lands) and identities are connected with the immigrant's need to transform her/himself to the space she/he is inhabiting. From a transnational perspective, the continuous crisscrossing of borders prompts the emergence of multiple subjectivities and selves that the immigrant adopts and abandons within the context of the diasporic communities. In "The Third and Final Continent" both protagonists have crossed geographical lines in order to attain a dream and also to be finally together in America. The male narrator-protagonist observes and describes the American lifestyle and how he tries to adapt to the new situation: "In a week I had adjusted, more or less. I ate cornflakes and milk, morning and night . . . I bought tea bags and flask . . . To pass time in the evenings I read the Boston Globe" (176). He even describes Mala's efforts to live in a country so different from her natal India. At the end of the story, the narrator suggests the complete "adaptation" of both himself and Mala to America. Mala, like Mrs. Sen, is no longer the same woman who left India. These female characters' present lives in America, even when they "recreate" India at home, involve a change: Mala has "evolved" and now seems to embrace her new American reality; neither is Mrs. Sen the same woman

who left India, even though she keeps trying to recreate India in her American house.¹⁴⁰

Border crossing involves identity crossing, where an ultimate self-transformation is impelled by the physical move.

The female protagonist in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Ashima, is likewise caught between two cultures. Throughout the story Ashima transforms her "self," getting used to her new context. Actually, when Ashoke dies and she decides to move back to India for some period of time, she hesitates, as the narrator explains, because she "feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its way foreign" (278). The numerous journeys from India to America and vice versa that appear in the story symbolize the continuous "re-fashioning" of Ashima's (self)selves. Borders and criss-crossing provoke Ashima's self-transformation. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of this story, its inconclusive ending, reinforces the impression that Ashima's "self" is still in motion.

Aparna, the protagonist in "Hell-Heaven," spends her days, as the title of this short story suggests, in between a "hell" and "heaven." Her "hell" is represented by the failure of her hopes and illusions—her lover, her enclosure in the domestic space—whereas her "heaven" corresponds to those days where Aparna enjoyed the company of young Pranab. The Aparna that the readers see at the end of the story, she tries to commit suicide, contrasts with the initial Aparna, so full of life and expectations in America (and later, in Pranab). Aparna's disappointment when she finds that Pranab is seeing another woman triggers her change: she then becomes much more committed to keeping Bengali traditions as her way of protesting against what Pranab and Deborah's interethnic marriage represents. Aparna forces

140 When using the concept of "evolving," it is necessary to remark the connotation that "evolve" implies, as it conveys a positive change, almost "self-controlled." Some of Lahiri's characters consciously evolve as they need to adapt to the new context they are living in and they do it in an optimistic way, as is the case with Mala or Ashima. However, there is also a parallel process of transformation, the one explored by Alexander, which is largely imperceptible and leads to the "unselving" of one self to become another.

her “self” to go back to a position where she does not really belong any more. Her failed suicide is also provoked by the disappointment she feels when she realizes that Pranab is marrying a second wife who is Bengali, like Aparna, but not her. Aparna sees her “self” trapped in an ongoing self-transformation that she is trying to avoid. She tries to return to her previous self and space but she cannot feel the same because she has changed; Aparna has sloughed off her past identity and now she is lost in between the promise of change and the burden of a past which is pushing her forward. Aparna has lost her dream and her hopes, and now she cannot go back, she must move forward in search of her identity and space.

As we have seen, at the end of these stories the identities of these female characters are still in progress. Lahiri creates situations that twist these women’s destinies and force them to be born again, adjusting to their new situation. Anupama Jain endorses the concept of the “hybrid” *Bildungsroman* as the suitable framework in which to view immigrant narratives of “becoming American” (29), echoing Hestetun’s idea of the immigrant *Bildungsroman*. Jain maintains that the “hybrid” *Bildungsroman* represented by these immigrant discourses differs from the orthodox European *Bildungsroman* in the rejection of any assimilationist approach. The immigrants in the “hybrid” *Bildungsroman* actively “re-shape” themselves, while “re-imagining” America at the same time. As I see it, the distinctive feature that Hestetun and Jain find in the immigrant *Bildungsroman* can be explained in terms of evolution, that is, in the positive intention these immigrants have toward the process of “growing up” in the America they have imagined. Jasmine, Aparna and even the other, more “silenced” characters in Lahiri’s texts, such as Mala and Mrs. Sen, are unceasingly re-negotiating themselves and their vision of America. For some of them America means a challenge to confront, for others it means hope, and for some America turns into a nightmare, but all these women re-invent themselves multiple times in looking for a sense of belonging.

Chinese Americans' "Refashioning Selves"

The Woman Warrior can be considered as a "hybrid" or "immigrant" *Bildungsroman* that traces young Maxine's development from the time when she is a little girl until her adulthood. Maxine's *Bildung*, her formation, is beyond the scope of this dissertation, which focuses on first generation characters; however, Maxine's "coming-of-age" is essentially related to her mother, Brave Orchid, and, to a lesser extent, to her aunt, Moon Orchid. Maxine's development is highly determined by her growing up in America; it is likewise shaped by the Chinese traditions that she lives in her household. Thus, Maxine's life in America fluctuates between the old Chinese culture, represented by the tales her mother tells her, and the young girl's need to "adopt American codes" (Douglas 128) that differentiate her from the other women in her family. She must speak out and articulate her "self" in America. She has seen how "silence" has destroyed her aunts. Indeed, Moon Orchid's insanity becomes noticeable when she is not able to "name her[self]" (Henke 221). Moon Orchid's inability to renegotiate her self-transformation and to adapt her identity to a new context which denies the patriarchal patterns precipitates her "madness." Her insanity is caused by her inability to re-fashion her "self." In contrast with her aunt, Maxine breaks the silence imposed by gender and race constructions, voicing her individuality and her "self." But, as Schueller and other critics have argued, Maxine's voice is not an individual one: it echoes the other female voices existing in *The Woman Warrior*, by the very act of retelling their untold stories. With this strategy, Kingston proclaims the necessity of a "dialogic intersubjectivity and community as the realm of hope and possibility" (Schueller 146). In contrast with the archetypal silence imposed by the patriarchal tradition, Kingston urges women to speak up and she does so in

the narrator, who transforms her “self,” while at the same time invoking and retelling the other women’s silenced stories. Maxine’s *Bildungsroman* echoes many individual stories looking for a resolution and avowal of their “selves.”

Similarly, in “Translating and Transforming the American Dream,” Weimin Tang describes *Typical American* as the “tracing of the *Bildung* of the Chinese immigrant protagonists’ acculturation into U.S. society” (128). Within this *Bildungsroman* pattern, Ralph embodies the hero who grows from the adolescent who came to America to study for a degree into the adult who sacrificed his life and his family’s life for the sake of his own Dream. *Typical American* exemplifies the “rags-to riches” idea embedded in the Dream. As we have already seen, Ralph continuously renegotiates his “self,” adopting American codes and mingling them with his Confucian principles: “I will cultivate virtue” (6). He is trying to reconcile his old culture and the new one in the construction of his subjectivity as a new Ralph Chang. Echoing the archetypal Adam, Ralph embraces the possibilities America offers him in his “innocent” journey towards becoming the “man-god,” as the narrator sarcastically suggests in the section entitled “The Imagineer” (88). Indeed, Ralph’s aspirations are almost divine, because he envisages his “mission” in America in those semi-religious terms. However, in this process of construction of his new American subjectivity, Ralph refuses to become completely Americanized; he does not want to be an American citizen officially (23), either. Thus, he rejects complete assimilation, but, conversely, he embraces the “typical American” way of life wholeheartedly. In fact, it is the “typical American” Grover who represents for Ralph a model of success: a Chinese man who has achieved his (materialistic) dream.

In “Moving selves” (2004), Simal argues that, in *Typical American*, Jen is “consciously following the process of assimilation and ‘unselving’ of a Chinese immigrant in

the United States” (158). In her recent article “Translating and Transforming the American Dream” (2009), Tang maintains that the historical context in which the action of the novel takes place is highly significant, since it corresponds to the moment when the incipient multiculturalist perspective rejected any assimilationist discourse that proclaimed itself to be “American-centered” (128), is highly relevant. According to Tang’s hypothesis, Jen would thus use the novel to criticize the Changs’ “assimilationist Dream” at a moment when this paradigm had come under attack. In her skillful portrayal of the “Chang-kees,” Jen shows them to be “unconsciously” preoccupied with their own identity. They are specially worried about the ways in which their identity can change in the American context, whether they will become more or less American. In *Conversations with American Women Writers*, Jen explains that, in *Typical American*, the characters take advantage of the freedom the new country offers them and they can think about who they are now, which is something, Jen contends, they would never have considered in China (93).

At this point it is necessary to return to the notion of “mimicry” that reinforces and subverts the assimilationist ideal. Ralph conceives being American as something he can easily “adopt” and even “discard.” In a comic passage of the novel Ralph convinces Helen and Theresa that a car—the quintessential symbol of Americanization—can help prevent the children from becoming too infatuated with America: “Everywhere we go, we can keep the children inside,” away from any American influence, they complain (128). However, as I discussed in previous sections, the Changs do not want to copy Americans completely, but selectively. Thus, Bhabha’s “slippage” perfectly suits the Changs’ ambivalent attitude towards their “Americanization.” At the same time, as Tang maintains, the Chinese past, the old culture in Boelhower’s terms, emerges as a double throughout the novel, constantly indicating from the background the Changs’ Chineseness as an “actively residual” element in

their construction of their new selves in America (135). This tension between past and present pervades this novel, and its characters spend much of the time discerning who they want to become, much like its sequel, Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*.

As we have seen in earlier sections, the Changs will always be the “racialized other” in America as they cannot completely assimilate to American society. Their house, their grass, are just Chinese American versions of the American one. In one scene where they try to emulate living like “Americans,” they cannot understand their inability to make the grass grow in their backyard like the American neighbors do (see chapter 3.4). The passage where Helen meets their neighbor, the “typical American” Mr. Smith, signifies the encounter between the “real” American and the “Other,” and partly echoes the episode of the swimming pool party in “In the American Society.” Mr. Smith's preconceptions about Chinese and Japanese identifies the Changs as racialized others. He even suggests that Chinese people do not know how to look after a lawn (159). Jen creates this scene full of stereotypical images to question how far the Changs can participate in mainstream society without being considered unassimilably alien or different. In the same way, Jen tackles the limits of the American Dream in its immigrant version. In coming to America the Changs have had to juggle different many cultural systems in order to construct new identities. However, in their conscious attempt to delimit and constrain this adjustment, they actively personify the label they have tried to avoid: they are, after all, “typical Americans.”

Though *Bildungsroman* tend to focus on young characters—here, Mona and Callie, the daughters—, in a real sense *Typical American* is Ralph's *Bildungsroman*. Ralph embodies the Asian American hero who “comes of age” in his quest for the American Dream, and his formation is accompanied by the “silent” parallel growth of Helen and Theresa, whose self-transformation is far from secondary. As we have already seen, the progression of the silent

Helen towards a Helen who is center of the house is obvious. In the section “Helen, Breathing,” Jen portrays another Helen who ignores her husband’s protests and seeks her own happiness. She starts re-negotiating her own terms in Ralph’s household. She initiates an affair with Grover and she also puts an end to it. By the end of the book, she is not that initial silent woman anymore. She has re-invented her “self,” trying to live her dream instead of Ralph’s own. As a result, Helen’s role in the household becomes even more significant. She chooses the house and decorates it. Apparently, then, she intends to look for the articulation of her dreams and abandon her “silenced” obliterated position in the household. As Zhang contends, Helen eventually becomes “her resourceful self” (45). However, Jen is not benevolent with her and, at the end of the novel, she pays for her affair in the same way Theresa pays for her furtive relationship with a married man. Jen is not interested in writing a novel supporting a Dream which has been denied to those “racialized” and “gendered” immigrants for so long. The ending of *Typical American* subverts the value of the American Dream for ethnic immigrants. Only when Ralph realizes that his Dream has destroyed Helen’s and Theresa’s lives, does he finally discern how the Dream has become a nightmare. The Chungs will always be the “other” in America, as they cannot completely “copy” what they consider to be “Typical American.” Ralph’s *Bildungsroman* is focuses on the movement from a “romantic” and “naïve” idea of the American Dream to an economic version of the Dream, expressed in “a new language of materialism” (Lam 68). Ralph, like Moon Orchid’s husband, has betrayed his own “self” and “ethics” for the sake of an alternative Dream.

3.8. An Ecocritical Reading of the American Dream

When I first entered the room at the Barbizon, she [Audre Lorde] had pointed out the tree outside her window, its branches spare in the summer sunlight. A poet needs a tree, I had said to her, always.

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*

Where is nature represented in these Asian American narratives? Some of the characters in Maxine Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee and Gish Jen's texts engage in a conscious or unconscious "conversation" with nature in their search for the American Dream. When the Dream fails, they seek "nature" for the sake of finding relief, peace, home and happiness. I argue that there is a possible ecocritical reading of both Mukherjee's and Kingston's narratives of the Dream, understanding ecocriticism in its broadest sense. As anticipated in chapter 2.2, it was not until the end of the twentieth century that ecocritics started to reconsider the limits of environmental criticism. Buell, Armbruster and Wallace demanded a revision of ecocritical studies that widened their object of analysis, so that ecocritics could pay attention to other environments, like urban or built landscapes. In the texts that we are studying here, there nature is used "not merely as a framing device" (Buell 7-8), but as something alive that changes and makes the characters' aware of it. This is a "nature" that occasionally appears as "unspoiled," and more often than not as "spoiled," or else as an "artificial" nature created by humans.

As matter of fact, the American Dream itself demands an ecocritical approach as "nature" has played a major role in the creation of the Dream. As I discussed in the

introductory chapters, America was envisioned by the first pioneers of this Dream in terms of “land,” an unlimited virgin and wild territory where dreams of America could be nurtured. Obviously, neither America was so virgin nor the pioneers’ dreams were so innocent. America had a large and thriving population already in 1491. Unfortunately, the “wilderness” the first Europeans envisioned was the product of the wiping out of native peoples. Nevertheless, in the course of the first emigrations to America, during the mid-nineteenth century, “nature” was already being “explored” by settlers from the Old World. At that time, a double perspective emerged which saw nature, on the one hand, as paradise, and on the other, as dangerous wilderness. These two early interpretations evince the manifold and tangled relation that nature and human beings have maintained in the American continent.

In a world that is demanding “human” intervention, instead of abuse, in order to preserve “nature” from its final destruction, ecocriticism arises as a distinctive interdisciplinary study that avows a political mode of analysis, as Greg Garrad contends, in order to denounce and nurture—consciously or not—with some “food for thought” (3). In their interpretations of the immigrant American Dream, Kingston, Mukherjee and Jen not only manifest the limitations their characters find in achieving such an uncertain idea, but they also explore how the archetypal American Dream has forgotten its “natural” essence and has turned instead into an artificial nightmare of capitalistic and vertical success.

The “Corrupted Paradise” in *Jasmine*

The first image Jasmine sees when approaching the American shores is the blurred image of a spoilt America: “The first thing I saw were the two cones of a nuclear plant, and smoke spreading from them . . . like a gray, intricate map of an unexplored island continent,

against the pale unscratched blue of the sky. I waded through Eden's waste . . ." (107). Jasmine, as the old pioneers once did, is observing the new world for the first time, but the imaginary world implicit in this scene evokes, on the one hand, some reminiscence of an imperialist past when Jasmine "discovers" the new world, and on the other, the passage subverts the prototypical image of the "undiscovered," "unspoiled" land that colonial and postcolonial narratives have typically portrayed. Thus, when the narrator describes America as a map of an unexplored island continent, Mukherjee is reinforcing the "pioneer" and "colonizer" role that this South Asian woman character has. Maps are "conceptual tools," as Jennifer Price argues, that Americans have used them to direct and understand the connections between the social and "ecological world" around them (xx). What is more, from a postcolonial perspective, maps have been used to name and rename the "*terra nullius*," thus claiming sovereignty over a territory (Miller et al 131)¹⁴¹ Therefore, Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* conjures up the colonial and postcolonial view of nature: as an entity that can be claimed and identified in order to be possessed. By doing so, Mukherjee is echoing the old imperial colonizations, as the writer wants to compare Jasmine's own journey to America with that made by the first pioneers. However, Jasmine's arrival in America differs from the arrival of those first settlers in many aspects. One of them is the vision she has of the land, which has nothing in common with the "unexplored" and virginal Eden claimed by the first pioneers. Jasmine observes a new world which is both polluted and "gray." An Eden full of waste, i.e. a wasted Eden, which suggests the American continent is no longer virginal but corrupted. In this scene there are no traces left of the paradisaical nature evoked by the Europeans who first saw America. With this decadent image of America, Mukherjee

141 As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin remind us, naming is claiming, or so was the strategy followed by the British Crown in its imperialist colonization, and also by other colonial and neocolonial powers (*Postcolonial Studies* 26). The act of discovery of a new territory was materialized in the maps which represented the naming and renaming of spaces as an "act of mastery and control" (26).

anticipates the depraved act that heralds Jasmine's "entrance" to the new world. Her rape not only ends with the murder of Half-face, the attacker, but also with the murder of Jasmine's past. The apocalyptic image of America that Jasmine encounters does not diminish her plans, only alters them, making her more conscious of her individuality and the need to look for her place. Furthermore, I argue that this scene where Jasmine discovers a corrupted and decayed America conveys the old confrontation between nature and technology. Mukherjee exemplifies this opposition in Jasmine's words: "I waded through Eden's waste: plastic bottles, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs" (107). The birds feed themselves in the waste human "progress" has left behind. The Eden that the first settlers saw in America is no longer an Eden, it is just a plastic-filled wasteland that Mukherjee renders with images of jetsam. In *New Strangers in Paradise*, Gilbert H. Muller contends that these flotsam images symbolize Jasmine herself and how she enters this country (208). I do not completely agree with Muller, as Jasmine has a clear initial intention in coming to America, she is not "hurled upon this continent like so much flotsam and jetsam" (Muller 208). The images of flotsam are associated with America, not with Jasmine.

We can conclude, then, that, for this South Asian American Eve, the Eden is no longer to be found in the new continent. The America she encounters is but a corrupt version of "the original." Despite this initial negative vision, however, Jasmine continues her confident journey, like the old pioneers, trying to find a suitable place to settle. This time, however, the elements in the frontier paradigm are reinterpreted according to the new American reality, where nature is corrupted, Eden is no longer such, and the pioneers are "Eves" who explore this new land on their own. The New World, as Nash aptly explains, motivated the first pioneers to come to America, lured by the "European notion that an earthly paradise lay

somewhere to the west” (25). Jasmine has not seen that paradise yet, but she will continue her journey towards the West as the first South Asian American Eve, heading West as the old pioneers did, in search of the lost paradise.

In her peculiar “pilgrimage,” Jasmine meets the America of technology, of “machines in the garden(s),” where there are not any vestiges of an existing paradise: “We pass half-built, half-deserted cinder-block structures at the edge of town” (109). Jasmine feels repulsion towards the new landscape she sees: “It is by now only a passing wave of nausea, this response to the speed of transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American landscape” (138). In *Landscape and Power*, W. J. T. Mitchell argues about the possible complex and subjective meanings of the “landscape.” Mitchell maintains that landscapes trigger off several “emotions and meanings” in the people who contemplate them. Hence, the character of the landscape is indeterminate, as the significance of a certain landscape depends on individuals’ subjective and personal approach. In her novel Mukherjee deals with the transformation in the landscape and the parallel transformation in the protagonist’s identity. The American landscape that Jasmine observes and perceives is a reflection of her own subjectivity, a subjectivity that is being constructed and transformed in America. The American Dream has always invoked the existence of a free land where immigrants can imagine and live the life they have always wanted. Consequently, some transformation is embedded in the very concept of the American Dream, which is construed as an Edenic re-birth. Upon arrival, Jasmine does not see the preconceived image of Eden she expected to find. Instead, this corrupted landscape anticipates her rape in the motel room. The rape will lead Jasmine to re-negotiate her “selves.” Jasmine’s “re-birth” in the motel room turns her into Kali, the goddess of destruction. Reborn in this way, her new “self” is prepared to confront the American “reality.”

Jasmine moves to New York—the “greatest” city in the world—leaving behind Flushing, Queens: the ghetto. However, there she only sees beggars and she sadly remarks that she must have arrived in New York too late. She feels cheated because, New York turns out to be just one more city, with poverty, misery and “outsiders”: “New York was an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens” (140). However, it is in New York that Jasmine finds some recognition and understanding, while he works as a babysitter, a “day mummy,” for a couple who eventually split up. As Hans Bak notices, it is in New York that Jasmine transforms her “self,” as the city is “a site of passage,” of “plurality, fluidity, discontinuity and difference” (286). When everything in her life seems to be taking shape and she is on the verge of feeling completely satisfied with her current situation, suddenly the shadow of the past reappears, causing Jasmine to flee once more, triggering a new self-transformation in her change of context. The final decision Jasmine makes is leaving New York, the city, and heading to Des Moines, Iowa, the Midwest. Jasmine could have hidden anywhere else, even in the same city, as Taylor had suggested to her, but she is sure of her choice: she moves to the countryside, she “goes West,” as the old pioneers had done in search of a new land for their dreams, leaving behind their past lives and miseries.

In “The Technological Hybrid as Post-American: Cross-Cultural Genetics in *Jasmine*,” John K. Hoppe discusses the role of technology in the novel. He distinguishes between immigrant characters, Jasmine and Du, and the “authorized subjects of the American national narrative,” that is, Darrel and Bud. Hoppe maintains that whereas Jasmine and Du embrace technologized America and its fluidity, the “American characters,” Darrel and Bud, “fail to fulfill [their agrarian] destiny” (149), a destiny connected to the dreams of their respective parents. Hoppe argues that Mukherjee wants to reflect the dangers of keeping traditions unalloyed, by showing Darrel’s tragic end after he refuses to continue with his

father's legacy and the farm. In Bud's case, Hoppe affirms that "he too has paid a price for his involvement with the farm society" (151). Hoppe maintains that Mukherjee prizes the immigrants who embrace technology as a synonym of America and progress, whereas the tradition represented by Bud and Darrel and their resistance to progress and change is penalized. I do not completely agree with Hoppe on this point, as Mukherjee does not reward Jasmine or Du for embracing the progress; they are new pioneers and as such they have to accept and adapt to their situation in this country. Meanwhile, Bud and Darrel are not punished for supporting technology, but, I would argue, for forgetting the Dream that their ancestors held dear.

There is a complex dialectics between technology and nature/farming/tradition in *Jasmine*. As Marx puts forward in *The Machine in the Garden*, the pastoral idea of "nature" is truncated by the technological progress of the modern society. In *Jasmine*, the Ripplemeyer family has been traditionally related to the land, the earth, and this way of life, close to the land, has survived through generations of Ripplemeyers, which suggests the importance of origins, of the first Ripplemeyer who came to America in search of "new land" in the "new world." Thus, the American Dream and its association with the earth, as Marx theorizes, is conjured up in *Jasmine*. The advance of progress and technology as it is portrayed in *Jasmine* echoes Marx's thesis when he affirms that the "pastoral" tradition of the land is halted by the inescapable progress of modern times. Bud and Darrel are not prepared to continue the tradition, and they surrender to "progress": they abandon their land and transform it into an artificial nature, "a golf course."

The tragic events that surround Bud's and Darrel's life and death, respectively, cannot be interpreted as Mukherjee's way of criticizing their lack of interest in the land; on the contrary, I understand Bud's impairment and Darrel's suicide as the consequence of

abandoning the land, “nature,” for “progress” and technology. Darrel, Bud’s neighbor in Iowa, whom Hoppe describes as “the mid-westerner, inheritor of the ‘heartland of America’” (149), cannot bear the pressure of the heritage that links him to the land, the farm, his father’s work and dream. Darrel wants to sell the farm, he “doesn’t want to live poor and die rich like his father and grandfather, he wants to fly away to Tahiti, to Mars, to the moon” (217). Bud’s comments when talking about Darrel’s choice corroborate this analysis. Bud does not see any disloyalty in Darrel’s sale of the farm, “in which case a golf course isn’t a betrayal” (23). Here, Bud is voicing the core of the problem Darrel and he are facing: they are betraying their past, the land “conquered” by their ancestors, and relinquishing it in favor of technological progress.

From an ecocritical perspective, Darrel’s tragic death –he hangs himself in the barn, and is eaten by his hogs-can be interpreted as the rebellion of “nature” against technology. He is punished for being “against the land.” In much the same way, Bud, the other mid-western character, is shot by a farmer when he tries to impose different economic conditions on the farmer and on his land. Both Bud and Darrel have tried to change the “natural” order of things, sacrificing the land inherited from their ancestors to “technology/progress/capitalism.” They have killed the Dream their grandparents hoped for. It is the “modern” versus the “old” order of the land, and in this opposition Mukherjee favors the “old,” by portraying the consequences that the “new” has had in America, in the land.

That is why it is useful to contrast Jasmine, a South Asian immigrant who embraces America, and the “progress” this country represents in comparison with her homeland, on the one hand, and Bud and Darrel, both (white) Anglo-Americans, descendants from the first European pioneers who came to the new continent to find their “freedom,” on the other. The difference between Jasmine, Bud and Darrel lies in the fact that Jasmine is “discovering” the

new world for the first time, whereas Bud and Darrel are “spoiling” the country; the latter have lost their belief in the Dream. From the perspective of a first-generation immigrant, America is already spoiled and she, as the first South Asian American Eve, begins her journey in an already technologized America.

At the end of novel, we can have a final glimpse of the lure of the American Dream is evinced. Taylor—the man Jasmine had left in New York City and someone who had always loved and respected her—and his daughter, Jasmine’s “day daughter,” drive to Des Moines to propose a change of life for her. The last change in Jasmine’s life involves leaving everything behind. As a new Asian American Eve, she is heading for the last frontier, the last piece of land where the first settlers could start or at least dream of starting a new life in the West. Taylor’s statement, “It’s a free country” (239), originally meant to encourage Jasmine to leave Bud and escape with him to the West, constitutes the culmination of the American Dream, read as the opportunity to become free from the old bonds. Mukherjee embraces the American Dream, but, at the same time, she consciously unfolds those “ghosts” embedded in the Dream that have haunted so many “ethnic” immigrants. Simultaneously, Mukherjee interprets the old American Dream from the perspective of a new “Eve” living in an America that has lost its “natural” core, in the same way that the Dream has. Jasmine, a “flower” in the American “waste land,” will continue seeking the lost paradise that the new country used to stand for.

The Woman Warrior: Two Orchids Blooming in the Concrete

Kingston’s works have rarely been approached from an ecocritical perspective (see Simal’s “Claiming”), and even her seminal *The Woman Warrior* is no exception. Here I

propose such a reading of “At the Western Palace,” a chapter where Kingston uses natural elements that mirror the protagonists’ feelings in America.

When Moon Orchid arrives at her sister’s American house, the narrator describes Brave Orchid’s husband under a tangerine tree. The image of the tangerine tree gives a favorable impression of Maxine’s father. The narrator even notes that “[h]er sister [Brave Orchid] has married the ideal in masculine beauty” (119). The passage reveals the figure of the narrator’s father as a silent but positive presence, by using the image of a natural element—the tangerine tree—that creates in Moon Orchid a favorable impression about her sister’s husband. The second element that Moon Orchid notices when she enters the American home is a carp: ““Oh, look at this. . . . Just look at this. You have carp”(122).¹⁴² Moon Orchid is “discovering” an America that is full of “nature,” emulating the first Chinese pioneers in the new world. What is more, when both sisters go to Chinatown, the narrator cannot avoid evoking the rural connotations that accrue to this ethnic enclave: “They walk past the vegetable, fish, and meat markets” (139). Everything resembles Moon Orchid’s village; hence, everything is familiar. Nevertheless, Chinatown is not her village and the freshness she sees only pretends to be natural, as it is “human-made.”

On their way to Los Angeles to meet Moon Orchid’s husband, the narrative voice continues describing the natural environment that they see from the car: “driving between the grape trees, which hunched like dwarfs in the fields” (143). Nevertheless, when Moon Orchid approaches the real task she has come to perform in America, there is a change in the landscape: “green fields changing to fields of cotton on dry, brown stalks, first a stray bush here and there, then thick” (144). The change in the landscape from “green” to “brownish” is

142 It is interesting to point out how carp are traditional Chinese “pond” fish, that is, a piece of “artificial” nature at home. It is also worth mentioning that, in Chinese mythology there is an old fable called “Carp Leap over Dragon Gate” that tells the story of a carp which turns into dragons. This moral tale encourages the values of endurance, equal opportunity and effort rewarded (Birrel 242). Thus, the fable of the carp in some ways illustrates the promise of “self-making” embedded in the American Dream.

intimately connected with both Orchids' feelings. The more they approach their "mission," the more the greenness disappears, anticipating the scene where Moon Orchid's happiness and innocence will come to an end. The climax of this scene, of the Orchids' mission in the West, is represented with the vision of a "skyscraper," the image of civilization and development, as well as the paradigm of "Americanness," in contradiction with the idealistic image that Perry Miller claims in "Nature's Nation." There, Miller enthuses about the special connection that Americans have created between the natural world and the ideas of virtue and goodness. As John Kouwenhoven relates in his "What's American about America?" the image of the "skyscraper" stands as a product of American metropolitan human progress. Observing the Manhattan skyline, Kouwenhoven discerns the "double" meaning of this "insane" product. On the one hand, the skyscraper symbolizes the greediness of humankind, the economic success and the triumph of ostentation in a noisy, sick society. At the same time, the Manhattan skyline is regarded as "one of the most exaltedly beautiful things man [sic] has ever made" (25). Both sisters contemplate the greatness that surrounds the skyscraper, which also threatens them as an inscrutable presence that they cannot comprehend. Furthermore, for the first time, Kingston shows us a Brave Orchid who loses her courage when she sees this new America: "and she suddenly felt carsick. No trees. No birds. Only city" (146). She needs to go for walk, to breathe, but the air she breathes is "full of gasoline fumes" (147). The narrator describes in detail the building, the plastic couches, the corridors without windows. The latter deeply irritate Brave Orchid, since she perceives corridors without windows as "tunnels" (147), where she feels trapped. The oppressive feeling is further reinforced by metallic and glassy imagery that constitutes the urban landscape the two Orchids meet in Los Angeles.

The opposition of “Nature versus Skyscraper” could also be interpreted as the opposition between Moon Orchid and her husband. In “Mirroring the Doubles,” Simal explores the symbolic use of landscapes in Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses*. The opposition existing between both sisters is translated into the two different physical settings they inhabit: America and China. The Chinese American sister inhabits the “American urban landscape,” whereas the Chinese one dwells in “the magic [sic] Chinese mountains” (241). This duality coincides with the antagonism existing between Moon Orchid and her husband and is evinced in the symbolic descriptions elaborated in the paragraphs where both characters are depicted within the framework of the American (urban) landscape. Moon Orchid would inhabit the “fields,” and though she is depicted as an “urban lady” from Hong Kong, there are many passages in the story where Moon Orchid is portrayed as having some pleasure on those rare occasions when she sees some “real nature” around her. We cannot forget that she is an Orchid. In contrast, her husband would be associated with the “concrete,” “steel” and “glass” of the “skyscraper” he inhabits and he loves. This “double” interpretation also explains Moon Orchid’s innocence versus her husband’s greed, an “innocence” also inherent in the natural images that Moon Orchid appreciates¹⁴³, and which contrasts with the avarice that characterizes the materialistic and capitalistic Dream that her husband has achieved. Such greed perverts Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid’s “naïve” journey to the West. Moon Orchid would be sent to the “Northern Palace,” emulating the emperor’s wife who has been defeated (155). The “Western Palace” was already corrupted by the technological decadence of America; Brave and Moon Orchid’s Dream would never be the same.

¹⁴³ Innocence has been a significant component in the construction of the Dream as well as in the myth of the American Adam, as seen in previous chapters. Pâtea notes that innocence was originally present in the myth of the Garden—as part of the myth of Adam—which is corrupted by the eruption of technology, following Leo Marx.

Hence, the natural imagery that flourished while both sisters were traveling west disappears, as the “paradise” where the Asian American Eves have arrived in the far west is no longer a paradise. Both sisters have lost the self-reliance and power that nature used to give them. Now they are just two Orchids in the city, stifled in the concrete. When, as I mentioned above, the narrator describes how Brave Orchid “breathed health from the air,” though the air was full of smoke and odors, the image of the corruption of the paradise is visible (147). The West is no longer a virgin land, wild nature ready to be claimed by the humans. Plastic is everywhere, most notably in the couches in the lobby. As Marx maintains, “centers of civilization” have as “their opposite, nature,” and “sophistication,” in both the original sense of adulteration and the more modern one of refinement, is opposed to “simplicity” (Marx 10); it is the city, the urban “unnatural” space that exists far away from the country, the natural world.

When Moon Orchid returns for a short time to her sister’s house, where she had been happy, Kingston draws the reader’s attention to nature again, though in its domesticated form: “the jade trees were inside for the winter. Along walls and on top of tables, jade trees, whose trunks were as thick as ankles, stood stoutly, green now and without the pink skin the sun gave them in the spring” (156). The tree is in Brave Orchid’s garden, the middle landscape in-between “wild nature” and “humankind,” a modern reinterpretation of the “original” Eden. A domesticated nature which has lost its “wild” core, it still remains a natural refugee where relief and wisdom can be found. It is the garden, the middle landscape, an “anthrome” (Simal, “Transnatural” 22). In this “anthrome” that the garden constitutes, Brave Orchid throws away the prescriptions Moon Orchid was taking and makes her sit in the sun. Thus, Kingston reinterprets the traditional American dream and retells it as a tale about loss, the loss of sanity

—represented by Moon Orchid—and the loss of confidence in the idea of America—exemplified in Brave Orchid.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the natural component is also crucial in the narrator's own *Bildung*. The reinterpretation of the Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan, a Chinese woman warrior, in the section "White Tigers" gives nature a significant role in Maxine's growth as a woman warrior herself, a fighter who will vindicate her heritage, claiming America for her and her family. Though an analysis of Maxine is beyond the scope of my focus on first-generation characters, let me just describe the section "White Tigers," where the relationship between the individual-nature is clearly emphasized, as it retells the journey the young narrator must undergo in order to become the legendary Fa Mu Lan. During her training, Kingston interweaves the "human" with the "natural," striking a perfect balance. "Nature" teaches the narrator how to become a warrior. This story is based on a Chinese legend, and such a relation between nature and the Chinese warrior depicted here could also be interpreted in the same terms as Native American legends related to earth. As Christian Feest puts forward, the traditional cliché that Native Americans were the first "conservationists" of the environment due to their "natural" connection with the "mother earth" is based on archetypes created by the European/Western mind in order to distinguish them from the rest of the American population. Feest argues that the close connection between Native Americans and the earth is mostly nurtured by Western minds and writers. Originally, Native Americans' close relation to the earth was explained because, like many other civilizations in the stages before technological progress, they needed the preservation of their natural environment for them to survive. Native Americans have also created a common identity in relation to the Mother Earth figure as an answer to their own history of oppressions and land loss (Gill 142). Nevertheless, as Kingston suggests in *I Love a Broad Margin to my Life* (2010), Native

Americans were not the only ones to pay tribute to Nature: “Chinese say Father Sky Mother Earth too” (79). In *The Woman Warrior*, Nature mirrors the characters’ feelings and expectations in America; it is necessary to make them feel secure, to nurture themselves in their “venture” in the new world. Unfortunately, as “At the Western Palace” unfolds, technological progress interrupts the dreamers. The skyscraper, the symbol of Moon Orchid’s husband’s economic and vertical dream, threatens the Orchids’ hopes of claiming an America that is far different from their ideal. As Jasmine encounters a corrupted residue of the America of her dreams, the sisters experience the same “nausea” when observing the new land of plastic, glass and concrete.

Typical American: “Wilderness” and “Paradise”

In *Typical American*, some “natural” elements are also interwoven in the story whose significance is intrinsically connected with the American Dream. Already in the first chapters Ralph describes what he sees on his train ride to New York, expressing his vision in a “natural” and “idyllic” way: “famous mountains lumbered by, famous rivers, plains, canyons, the whole holy American spectacle” (7). Surprisingly, the first things Ralph notices when he is on his way to New York—the city of the “skyscrapers”—is “nature” in its traditional “nonhuman” sense, an element that is not usually associated with urban space. However, there is no description of New York City. Ralph enthuses about the “greatness” of America, and the greatness involves rivers, mountains and plains. Therefore, I argue that Jen, in her wry satire of the quintessential idea of the American Dream, portrays Ralph’s enthusiasm precisely for that America that the old pioneers had imagined: the ultimate paradise. When the Chang family is searching for a house in Connecticut, the narrator describes the place as

the “garden of Eden”: “But so breathtaking were the streets that late afternoon, with their sentinel trees and tender gardens, that the sun itself seemed to waver, unsettling, reluctant to leave; it was the onlooker whose presence weighted everything. Colored it too, with banner greens, strawberry golds, every fairy-tale hue. And such peace!” (135). But, all of a sudden, the Edenic vision that Ralph claims is transformed into a humanized landscape; the Changs’ house, which is portrayed as being part of nature since the neighborhood is so new that the maps still show their house as “woods” (157), epitomizes the idea of an “anthropogenic ecosystem,” a non-human natural context, the woods, where humans are part of nature (Simal 3). Those woods that Ralph considers the last remnant of nature in its wild form are surrounded by human-urbanized areas.

As an “imagineer,” Ralph still sees himself emulating Franklin and those first colonizers who saw in America’s “wild” and “virginal” nature the perfect arena in which to construct their dreams. The map serves once more as the conceptual tool that determines the power relationship between nature and society. The neighborhood the Changs move to is such that there are still “natural” spaces which remain “unexplored” and “unnamed.” Coincidentally, the Changs’s house is one of these “unnamed” places. Since they are moving to an essentially “white” American neighborhood, the special location of their house in the woods reinforces the idea of the Changs as settlers, pioneers in an already explored America. The woods that surround the house serve as a metaphorical presence of the “unknown,” the “wilderness,” in its purest essence, but also “darkness,” as in the interpretation the early Puritans attributed to nature.

As was discussed in the introduction, Americans’ approach to the natural environment has evolved from the Puritan idea of “nature” connected with the wilderness and thus with the fright of the unknown, towards an opposite vision, where initial fear turns into a friendly

approach, and the conception of nature closer to the idea of Eden or the promise of renewal. In *Typical American*, Jen conjures up both visions of “nature” embedded in the Dream. On the one hand, Ralph is portrayed as the Asian version of the American Adam, describing the “greatness” of America in terms of a “nature” that is no longer “undomesticated.” On the other, he undergoes an almost epiphanic experience when he gets lost in the dark and uncertain woods. In fact, this scene of Ralph “exploring” the “*terra nullius*,” a territory unclaimed by the American neighbors, echoes the first colonizers’ discovery, though this time narrated in an ironic manner. The episode when Ralph gets lost in the “woods,” probably a not very large lot of land, can be read as a mock-epic. The night Ralph “explores,” the “amiable” and idyllic nature turns into darkness and evil, the same feelings Puritans saw in the “wilderness” existing beyond the Frontier, where men could fall¹⁴⁴. An epiphany occurs when Ralph, in the darkness of the woods, suddenly sees the “light”: “Before him now lay the path, illumined; and when he turned, he saw that the world that had been darkness was returned to him, magnificent in deep blues and grays and black, streaked gold” (185). After this scene, Ralph loses his “innocence” and calls Grover to start up a business together and pursue Ralph’s dream. Jen’s Asian American Adam falls and surrenders to the corrupted capitalistic dream that Grover epitomizes. As the archetypal Adam, Ralph loses his “innocence” in the garden; this time the snake that lures him is the promise of the bourgeois dream that Grover has offered him. The woods, the wild unknown nature, have tempted this Asian American Adam.

Jen, therefore, employs “nature” in *Typical American* to reinforce the traditional American Dream narrative. Her intention is to evoke, though from a satirical perspective, the

¹⁴⁴ In some ways Ralph’s woods echo *The Scarlet Letter*’s dark and mysterious forest, where Pearl has heard stories about the unknown, the devil and the “Black Man” (104). This forest is where Hester Prynne embraces the dark, the place where she feels protected from the Puritans’ gazes; it is also the place where she meets Dimmesdale. Thus, the woods have a manifold interpretation, as darkness and as intimacy and revelation, as also in *Typical American*.

myth of the Dream. In doing so, the writer represents nature in all its forms: idyllic, “fake” and obscure, since all of them are embedded in the American Dream. Nature plays a significant role in *Typical American* as a “hidden character,” whose positive or negative impact shapes Ralph’s Dream. Critics consider *Typical American* as a novel where the long-established “racial” and “gendered” American Dream is subverted. I would add that the various depictions of the natural element in this novel reinforce the view of the Dream as an idea imagined and revered by many immigrant generations. If the original Dream lay in the possibility to settle and occupy nature, Ralph’s perceptions of nature represent his distinctive idea of the Dream, with a self-evident “natural” component. Unfortunately, the vertical mobility that Ralph’s version of the Dream represents hides the “pure” essence of the original Dream.

Ecocriticism and environmental studies have opened a path which allows scholars to re-consider and re-negotiate our relation to nature; hence the necessity of revising traditional Dream narratives from the ecocritical and “natural” perspective so neglected in the materialistic versions of the Dream. In “The Pandering Landscape,” Marx argues that “[t]he idea of nature is one of the defining American ideas—as definitive in its way as the ideas of freedom and equality” (30). I completely agree with Marx’s claim, since nature, as I have discussed, has played a determinate role in the history of immigration to America. Nature has lured the immigrants with dreams and fantasies about a new life in a new world. Nevertheless, I argue that Marx’s assertion is also as uncertain and inconclusive as the ideas of freedom and equality embedded in the Dream. In fact, the main objectors to the Dream criticize the incongruence of a dream that postulates equality of individuals and freedom, which unfortunately the history of America has proved to be untrue. I maintain, however, that the notion of nature is one of the pivotal elements in constructing the idea of America. My

aim in analyzing these texts from an ecocritical perspective is to show how the American Dream cannot be understood without the presence of nature. Without nature, the American Dream would be never be the same as we conceive it nowadays. When the dreams are becoming nightmares and contemporary American literature is losing its faith in a dream, nature reappears, silently claiming its importance in nurturing the Dream, America and its dreamers.

4. Conclusions: “Imaginary Homelands,” “Imaginary Americas”

In search of the names
of the ones who did not write letters home
except to ask “how are you”
for fear that if they said more they would reveal
what had happened to their American dream.
Of the ones who wrote letters and then saved them
in the hopes of using them
to cover the cracks
that kept appearing in their mirrors when they looked at themselves.

Amitava Kumar, *Passport Photos*

Imagination is a crucial component of the American Dream. As a Dream it was envisaged by the first settlers that set foot on the American continent, trying to imagine a better place than the old and, in their eyes, corrupted Europe. This imaginary element explains those letters the immigrants wrote home, nurturing dreams about a country that had also corrupted them. In *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie evokes the dual reality the immigrant juggles with as he/she is caught between a present existence in an unfamiliar place and a past which represents home: “it reminds me that it’s my present that is foreign and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (9). In the immigrant

discourses that unfold in the texts studied here, India and China are always evoked in the past tense, because these “homelands” are no longer “homes” for those who recall them. Since the immigrant life in America entails an unceasing process of “re-shaping” and “re-negotiation” of his/her own selves and spaces, “imaginary homelands” become the only “permanent” entity, which the immigrant holds on to. The old countries serve as anchors that the immigrants treasure and “carry” with them in their uncertain lives in America. Sometimes this past brings to mind supportive memories of a better life, but the countries these characters left behind can also bring back a past that the immigrant refuses to remember and return to. In the latter case immigrants try to forget their memories of the past by creating a new present where there are no more reminiscences of their “imaginary homelands.” This connection between the past and traumatic memories leads us to the standpoint of the trauma theory, an approach that explores how memories are stored in the individual’s mind as the way to explain how the individual interprets reality. Traumatic memories force these immigrants to abandon that past and to live in a present situation that is also imaginary, as it has erased any trace of real past life. Rushdie acknowledges the relation between memory and “imaginary homelands” when he contends that “we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool” (24). In either case, whether traumatic memories exist or not, “homelands” are construed according to immigrants’ imagination and memories of a past that is no longer “present.”

In the same way that “homelands” are shaped by our imaginations, so is America. In the miscellaneous immigrant narratives studied here, there is a shared character that remains concealed and silent, America. The “construct” of America has inspired immigrants in the same way immigrants have inspired this country. America, like the “homeland” that the immigrant has left behind, is also inspired and “confabulated” by the immigrant’s mind.

America is imagined already in the immigrant "homeland" as a goal, aspiration, desire or dream. There is always something to expect in America, envisioned from its foundations as a land of dreams. In *The Epic of America*, Adams endorsed the oneiric vision of this country as the ideal pristine ground on which immigrants could accomplish their dreams. America has been dreamed into existence since its very inception, by both immigrants and non-immigrants; America has been imagined even before the immigrant set foot on the new world. Thus, with this dissertation I have tried to prove that, in immigration literature, together with the aforementioned "imaginary homelands," there is a concomitant "imaginary" construct: America itself.

Each of the immigrant stories scrutinized here features this "voiceless" protagonist, America, which lures and transforms immigrants' selves and identity. The history of America is characterized by a continuous attempt to describe a society that is unceasingly changing. In *Multiculturalism and the American Self*, Boelhower examined the attempts to define a society that, in the nineteenth century, was characterized as a "melting-pot," and later, at the end of the twentieth century, as a "multicultural" kind of "salad bowl," a concept that cultural pluralists envisioned as the best way to define the American society, respecting each individual's character and identity inside the bowl that America represents. However, the salad bowl idea did not ensure either that this formula was the one to define American society. Indeed, as Sollors claims, the most prevalent drama in American culture is trying to balance the "consent and descent" interpretations concerning the American character. There has been always the tension existing between the past and the promise of a future that is the basis of the myth of the self-made individual. In the light of this conflict inherent in the core of the country, how can we elucidate what America is like? The same ambiguity is present, as Simal notes, in the indeterminacy embedded in the "ethnic sign" invoked by Boelhower:

America and its society cannot be circumscribed as a single idea and entity. Borrowing Simal's hypothesis of "multiverse," "Chinese American Ethnogenesis," I argue that America, as a nation and an idea, accommodates the multiple Americas—or rather the many "imaginary Americas"—that immigrants long for. Furthermore, I argue that America should be considered not as a stable and fixed entity, but as an idea, an imagined community—echoing Anderson—which embraces multiple imaginary societies where the dreamers live, social enclaves parallel to what we imagine to be the "mainstream" America, an America immigrants will never be a part of. These "niches" constitute "micro-societies" where immigrant characters reproduce their "imaginary homelands," within the limits of their "imaginary America." Thus, "mainstream" America and those "micro-societies" symbiotically need each other in order to exist. As we saw in section 3.4, this imagined space could be considered as a "borderland," or in Bhabha's words a "Third space," a space between cultures where immigrant people share both cultures but do not quite "possess" these cultures independently. In this third space immigrants feel safe; however, their identity becomes "interstitial." The immigrant characters in the narratives studied here are all looking for this space where they can feel "free." Like Ashima, in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, they wander between cultures and worlds without even feeling that they belong anywhere. The lack of formal closure in these narratives reinforces the idea of the continuity of the dream, of the unceasing quest these immigrant characters have started.

At the beginning of the dissertation I questioned the existence of the American Dream and its permanence in contemporary immigrant discourses. Critics like Hume have indeed claimed the collapse of the Dream in non-ethnic literatures during recent decades, whereas the Dream seems to survive to some extent in immigration literature. The persistence of the Dream in these narratives is undeniable, as all of them aim to fictionalize immigrants'

aspirations in America. In contrast with Hume, however, I argue that the portrayal of the American Dream is not so different from that found in non-ethnic discourse. In the texts we have discussed, there is a disenchanting mood among the immigrant characters. And yet, there is still a noticeable difference between ethnic and non-ethnic discourse regarding the Dream, since the immigration narratives still portray the immigrant's feelings and dreams in America. Therefore, I want to argue that, as long as there is immigration literature, there will be an American Dream.

I am deliberately using the umbrella term "immigration literature/discourse" to refer to the different subgenres embraced by this category, that is, immigration narratives are not exclusively told by first or second-generation writers. Consequently, the distinction between immigrant and immigration discourse, discussed in earlier chapters, is no longer appropriate as there are other alternatives that dismantle these two fixed categories. On the contrary, as this dissertation also proves, immigration discourse is also constructed and shaped by the stories by writers such as Lahiri and Mukherjee who write about immigration and they are not necessarily immigrants. In a post-nationalist era where counter-narratives embrace the vanishing of nation's borders and physical lines, the immigrant discourse needs to incorporate the different alternatives, that as I already discussed, could be named "transnational immigration narratives." The permanence of the Dream is evident in the stories analyzed here, for Mukherjee, Jen, Lahiri or Kingston, all write about it. Their critiques and parodies of the Dream only unveil its durability in readers' minds. If the Dream disappeared, America would never be the same.

These four Asian American writers have broken some "boundaries" in their writings within the context of Asian American literature. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* shows the possibility of retelling and intermingling Chinese tradition and American reality in a feminine

context, undermining stereotyping traditions. Mukherjee, as I have noted, has been criticized for uncritically embracing the Dream and the American culture. However, she has been able to break other frontiers. In *Jasmine*, America and the Dream are not, as many critics have contended, idealized but, on the contrary, the novel is about the critical gaze with which the protagonist Jasmine, an immigrant woman, observes and scrutinizes her idea of America and the Dream. *Typical American* offers an ironic and comic critique of the archetypal Dream dreamed by Chinese Americans. Finally, Lahiri's portrayal of immigrant stories in America differs in some ways from that depicted by other contemporary South Asian women writers such as Divakaruni or Suleri, because, although, Lahiri tackles the same gender and cultural problems as the other writers, she does so in a more subtle and oblique way, thus encouraging the reader to read between the lines. Thus, the four writers we have focused on—Kingston, Mukherjee, Jen and Lahiri—cross many lines when fictionalizing their characters' dreams.

In the last decades, we can talk of a new literature positioned between “postcolonial/postnational subjecthood and American citizenship” (Simal, “Moving” 171), where diasporic and transnational paradigms intermingle, creating new narratives that attempt to subvert and “blur” the already existing ethnic boundaries. Consequently, categories such as “Asian American” and “Asian Asian” are no longer fixed and independent terms, but porous entities (171). Other critics like Sohn, Lain and Goellnicht have equally encouraged a view of Asian American literary studies from a much more permeable and transnational approach, due to the ongoing tendency of “cross-minority” and “cross-racial” representational critiques (4). Sohn, Lain and Goellnicht also endorse observation of the connection between Asian American identity and “social contexts,” since the social world outside can sometimes step into the fictional text (4). In view of this tendency towards an approach that “crosses

borders," I propose we use the term "transdream" to refer to these writers' narratives which have crossed many boundaries to depict the "trans-" character of the Dream.

In their literary production, writers, both "ethnic" and "non-ethnic," reflect the "anger or disillusion" of facing the disparity between the real America they see and the "ideal America" (Hume 266) they dream of. In view of the foregoing textual analysis, we can conclude that there are no insurmountable differences separating ethnic from the non-ethnic narratives in their treatment of the myth of the American Dream. In this dissertation I just focused on the "ethnic" perspective and representation of the American Dream. However, if we compare these texts with the review of American Dream in the literary canon in chapter 2.2, we can discern how, in terms of the Dream, the divergences between ethnic and non-ethnic writers are not so great. By affirming that there are no substantial differences between the ethnic and non-ethnic experience of the American Dream, I do not want to encourage the "Eurocentric" vision Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong has criticized in Boelhower's concept of immigrant autobiography. The major difference that persists and that I have discussed throughout this dissertation is the Color Bar, the frontier of the racialized body. As we have seen in the chapter devoted to the literary canon, both ethnic and non-ethnic writers evoke the American Dream in much the same way; however, the final achievement of the Dream substantially differs, as ethnic writers find some distinctive barriers. For non-ethnic writers, the Dream already belongs to a remembered past which has not turned out the way it was originally envisioned. For ethnic writers, the Dream is a present reality that transforms and subverts their existences in America. I will therefore repeat what Liste-Noya claims of the "secrecy" that lies at the core of America: the Dream has lied and promised in the same terms, and still continues to do so, for it is always a Dream envisioned by immigrant characters, regardless of their ethnicity.

The unfinished search that our Asian American narratives suggest is predicated on the American Dream itself, a quest that makes these immigrants' lives illusory. If, as Rushdie maintains, "to dream is to have the power" (122), for these immigrants, dreams, even flawed ones, constitute the hopes that impel them to continue living away from their homelands. The oneiric aspect that is part and parcel of the American Dream is further reinforced by the awareness that "[u]topias are by definition ideal communities" (Hume 280); hence, artists, in this case, writers, aim to construct or find those ideal communities in their art, in their texts. Kingston's, Mukherjee's, Jen's and Lahiri's characters are all looking for those "ideal communities" embedded in their Dreams. And yet, since what they are looking for is a utopian ideal, they can never attain what they are looking for, at least not completely. As such, they are but modern avatars of ancient Sisyphus. After all, these characters' ultimate Dream is to escape from a reality that does not proffer what they are looking for. Although, in the long run, some of these immigrant characters find some "piece" of the original American Dream, there is always a bitter aftertaste resulting from the impossibility of totally fulfilling one's hopes. As one of the character in Alexander's *Manhattan Music* puts it, "[t]his great Leviathan, America, surely it's our fantasy of freedom that makes it come alive, chewing off arms, legs, ears" (119). The narratives we have analyzed prove, beyond any doubt, that the American Dream both feeds and devours its dreamers.

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6. Appendix: Summary/Resumen

El “sueño americano” en la literatura de emigración de escritoras asiático-americanas (1976-2006)

Esta tesis doctoral explora topos del “sueño americano” en la llamada literatura de emigración, en concreto en la obra de varias escritoras americanas de origen (sud)asiático: Maxine Hong Kingston, Gish Jen, Bharati Mukherjee y Jhumpa Lahiri. Parto de la hipótesis de que, en los personajes que habitan los textos elegidos, podemos observar una tendencia a construir nuevos espacios dentro de la sociedad americana, que he denominado “micro-sociedades,” como respuesta a la búsqueda del “sueño americano”. Frente a la pérdida de confianza en el “sueño americano” que ha impregnado una gran parte de la literatura americana llamada “no étnica” desde finales del siglo XIX, mi pretensión es explorar este concepto, que ha sustentado durante siglos el imaginario cultural de los Estados Unidos de América, en la narrativa de estas cuatro escritoras americanas. Con este fin he localizado en qué difiere el “sueño americano” de la literatura de emigración respecto al “sueño americano” por antonomasia, original y directamente entroncado con el mito del “Adán Americano,” el individuo que abandona sus raíces para comenzar una nueva vida en otro lugar. Este héroe solitario, como su homólogo renacentista en Europa, se ha convertido desde su aparición en uno de los iconos culturales más notables de la literatura americana, mito vinculado no sólo al “sueño americano”, como apuntaba anteriormente, sino también a elementos como el individualismo propio de la sociedad americana, el hombre “hecho a sí mismo” y a la inocencia primaria que este irradia. Podemos afirmar que en la tradición del “sueño

americano” por antonomasia, ha existido una ausencia significativa, la de la heroína que busca su propio destino, que he dado en llamar “American Eve”. Dichas Evas han sido relegadas al olvido o a una posición secundario en el ideario del “sueño americano” que ha sido claramente masculino desde sus orígenes.

Asimismo, en esta tesis doctoral, investigo de qué modo el tratamiento del “sueño americano” está condicionado por las inflexiones socioculturales, fundamentalmente de género y etnicidad, atendiendo siempre a las propias culturas de origen de los personajes. Igualmente, es mi intención de(s)construir imágenes estereotipadas que han estado vinculadas a términos como género y etnicidad. Parto de la premisa de que, en la tradición literaria asiático americana, ha habido una construcción de género en torno al silencio, donde los personajes femeninos elegían el silencio y la invisibilidad como respuesta a una sociedad restrictiva y en la mayoría de los casos de carácter patriarcal. Por ello he querido explorar las diversas caras del silencio, voluntario u obligado, así como los significados que emergen de esos silencios. Dando una vuelta de tuerca a la perspectiva tradicional que considera la categoría “silencio” como exclusivamente femenina, analizo cómo los personajes masculinos también guardan un silencio, a menudo significativo a la hora de discernir las claves de sus experiencias en América.

Del mismo modo, al analizar el papel que desempeñan las “Evas” en el corpus elegido no se puede obviar el espacio doméstico, tradicionalmente relacionado casi de forma exclusiva con el mundo femenino. El análisis los personajes femeninos en estas obras nos lleva a corroborar, en la mayoría de los casos, que el espacio donde transcurren los días de estas “Eves”, donde “sueñan” acerca de América, es en la esfera doméstica. Un elemento intrínsecamente relacionado con el espacio doméstico es conectado a este lugar, la comida. De ahí que explore qué transcendencia literaria tienen las escenas en las que se describen

cómo estos personajes preparan la comida (generalmente con recetas que pertenecen a sus respectivas tradiciones culinarias), y cuál es su trascendencia y significado en la vida de estas “Eves.”

Al estudiar el “sueño americano” en la obra de escritoras americanas de origen (sud)asiático es necesario referirnos al concepto de “color bar,” y por ello dedico una parte significativa de la investigación al motivo recurrente del “racialized body”. El cuerpo de los personajes que nos ocupan se convierte en una barrera visible que los clasificará y estereotipará, condenándolos en muchos casos a vivir al margen del “sueño americano” por antonomasia. He analizado también la idea de la identidad o “self”, prestando especial atención a cómo estos personajes, mayoritariamente emigrantes en América, sufren procesos de transformación de su identidad.

Por último, he abordado una lectura ecocrítica del “sueño americano,” viendo cómo realmente existe una posible vinculación entre el concepto cultural del “sueño americano,” y la perspectiva del ecocriticismo. Así, demuestro a través del análisis de las obras *Jasmine*, de Mukjerjee, del capítulo perteneciente a la novela de Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, “At The Western Palace,” y de *Typical American*, de Gish Jen, la presencia reveladora y cargada de significado del elemento natural, muchas veces en forma de “anthrome”, en unas narrativas sobre el “sueño americano,” un sueño que nació como promesa de una nueva tierra, un paraíso, y que no difiere mucho del sueño que atrae a los personajes analizados en esta tesis, es decir, emigrantes (sud)asiáticos que persiguen el sueño de una América soñada a su vez como la panacea a todos los problemas y ambiciones. En estas obras, el elemento natural está presente, a veces recordando la esencia del “sueño americano” por antonomasia, otras veces, como refugio y consuelo a una realidad que poco se ajusta a lo “imaginado”.

Corpus, metodología y estructura

En un primer lugar, la elección de estas cuatro escritoras americanas de origen (sud)asiático y la de sus respectivas obras responde al hecho de que todas ellas, de reconocido prestigio literario, han marcado con las obras aquí analizadas un punto de inflexión en la manera de narrar, “ficcionalizar” y recrear el “sueño americano,” en versión asiático-americana. La publicación de *The Woman Warrior* de Maxine Hong Kingston en 1976 supuso el comienzo de una batalla literaria entre la escritora y los llamados nacionalistas chinos en torno a la autenticidad cultural de la obra y si representaba de una forma veraz la cultura y sociedad chinas en América. Por otro lado, *Jasmine*, de Bharati Mukherjee, relata la vida de una mujer emigrante de origen sudasiático y la búsqueda de su “sueño americano” en el nuevo continente. Mukherjee ha recibido numerosas críticas por contar una historia que exalta y promueve la idea de América como el paraíso terrenal que el “sueño americano” presupone, menospreciando, como han criticado sus oponentes, las raíces indias de la propia escritora. Como demuestro en la tesis, Mukherjee, más que apoyar ciegamente la idea del “sueño americano,” expone sutilmente las “fisuras” que encuentra en el mismo. Jhumpa Lahiri, otra autora cuyas obras, en su mayoría relatos, son también objeto de análisis en esta tesis, ha sido encasillada y descrita igualmente como una escritora de historias “fáciles” y amables por una parte de la crítica. En mi opinión, sin embargo, Lahiri es capaz de crear en sus historias un microcosmos de personajes entrelazados único, con el que la escritora ofrece unas acertadas pinceladas de la vida de estos emigrantes sudasiáticos en América, así como de sus sentimientos enfrentados respecto a sus “sueños americanos”. Por último, esta tesis analiza la primera novela de Gish Jen, *Typical American*, en la que la

autora recrea y evoca el paradigma del “sueño americano” masculino en versión chino-americana.

En cuanto a la metodología, he utilizado un aparato teórico de carácter ecléctico, como se observará a continuación. He organizado la tesis en varios bloques, el capítulo I, de carácter introductorio, el capítulo II, que sienta las bases teórico-metodológicas de mi investigación, y el último capítulo, III, que realiza un análisis del corpus narrativo desde las premisas críticas que he introducido en el capítulo anterior. A su vez, estos grandes bloques o capítulos (salvo la introducción) se subdividen en apartados más breves que paso a describir.

En el primer subcapítulo del capítulo II, trazo una perspectiva general de la historia de las migraciones sudasiática y china en América, sus similitudes y diferencias, y su presencia en la historia de los Estados Unidos. Los siguientes subcapítulos del capítulo II, están articulados en torno al *topos* “sueño americano.” Tras un breve recorrido por el origen y evolución de este concepto, analizo las conexiones existentes entre dicho *topos* y una serie de elementos fuertemente asentadas en la cultura americana: el “self-made man” u hombre hecho a sí mismo, el “American Adam” y las cualidades de inocencia e individualismo. De la misma manera, en esta sección exploro lo que a mi entender constituye el punto de partida de la relación existente entre el “sueño americano” y la naturaleza, es decir, el tema de la frontera y su importancia en la forja de un país y de una identidad. Continúo con un repaso esquemático de la presencia del *topos* “sueño americano” en la literatura americana “canónica”, desde los primeros sermones puritanos hasta la novela “post-9/11”. Al mismo tiempo, intento constatar que la diferencia que, según Kathryn Hume, existe en el tratamiento del “sueño americano” en la literatura étnica con respecto a la no étnica viene dada por la propia historia migratoria de ambos grupos, diferencia que se puede concretar en la idea del “color bar.” Propongo por ello que, en un principio, el “sueño americano” es el mismo para

cualquier individuo; la diferencia radica en las posibilidades que tienen unos y otros de hacer dicho sueño real. Al distinguir entre literatura de emigración y literatura escrita por emigrantes, se propone que en lugar de establecer dos categorías absolutas, es posible evitar esta dicotomía añadiendo una tercera opción en la cual estas cuatro escritoras podrían inscribirse con más precisión. Por último, reviso y examino en este capítulo II el concepto de etnicidad y cómo este afecta al “sueño americano”. Así, ofrezco una visión general de las distintas escuelas críticas que han intentado definir este concepto tan controvertido y crucial. Haciéndome eco de las teorías de Hollinger, Wald o Gilroy, intento atisbar el futuro de la etnicidad en un contexto sociocultural cuya imparable diversidad necesita una continua revisión de este concepto.

En el segundo gran bloque, desarrollado en el capítulo III, me centro en el análisis de las obras de estas cuatro autoras, apoyándome en diferentes perspectivas críticas. En “My America”, R.K. Narayan sostiene que la comunidad emigrante india en Estados Unidos muestra un mínimo interés (casi rechazo) en acercarse e integrarse en la nueva sociedad que los ha acogido. Es mi intención demostrar que la tesis de Narayan contrasta con lo que se desprende de los textos analizados (representativos de la literatura sudasiática-americana del momento) y, por ello, no se sostiene. En los siguientes subcapítulos analizo la dicotomía “individuo versus comunidad” en relación al “sueño americano,” con el objetivo de demostrar que el individualismo propio del “sueño americano” no es exclusivo de la literatura de no emigración, como Hume asegura, sino que los sueños son también individuales en estas historias de emigrantes.

En el capítulo III, esta tesis pretende hacer más visibles a esas “Eves” que participan en un “sueño” tradicionalmente masculino. Una presencia que como bien señala Leland S. Person, estuvo caracterizada en sus orígenes por una tendencia misógina que ha visto a la

mujer incapaz de participar en la dinámica del “sueño americano”. A esto hay que añadir que las “Eves” estudiadas en estas historias son de origen (sud)asiático, lo cual supone también un punto de inflexión en lo que se refiere al “sueño americano” por antonomasia, ideado y pensado por/para el “hombre blanco”. Así en la siguiente sección exploro las diversas “Eves” que aparecen en este corpus literario, comenzando con el epítome de pionera, Jasmine, que en mi opinión encarna la figura individualista del solitario héroe Americano que vaga buscando su propio destino, con guiños a la literatura del American Western. En la obra de Kingston también encontramos “Eves” que dejan su vida pasada en busca de los sueños de sus maridos. En la obra de Lahiri, se comprueba como los patrones de género comunes en otras escritoras sudasiático-americanas, como Chitra Divakaruni, Sara Suleri o Bapsi Sidha, se desvanecen. Lahiri ya no describe a los personajes femeninos como víctimas de sus propias tradiciones, como ocurría en en la obra de las citadas escritoras, coetáneas de Lahiri. Del mismo modo, las “Eves” de Jen también son capaces de sobrepasar una forzada “invisibilidad” impuesta por el protagonista masculino, cimentando poco a poco el fracaso del “sueño americano” materialista y masculinista de Ralph Chang. Esta tesis también dedica tiempo a explorar los “Adams” de estos relatos y novelas, comenzando por el mencionado Ralph. Así me embarco en un análisis del posible paralelismo de este “Adán” chino con su predecesor y epítome del “sueño americano,” Jay Gatsby. Dedico también cierto espacio a la figura paterna de *The Woman Warrior*, personaje que, a pesar de su aparente “invisibilidad,” es muy relevante en esta y otras obras de Kingston. Por último, en la obra de escritoras de origen sudasiático, observamos que los papeles masculinos son secundarios en la mayoría de los casos.

En la siguiente sección del capítulo III tomo como punto de partida los múltiples significados de la figura del “silence” en el corpus literario. Siguiendo el planteamiento de

King-kok Cheung, analizo de qué manera las “Eves” han sido silenciadas en el “sueño americano,” deteniéndome al mismo tiempo para ver si esos silencios son impuestos o reactivos, basándome en el estudio de Begoña Simal al respecto. Partiendo de estas bases teóricas, analizo los diversos tipos de silencio presentes tanto en los personajes femeninos y masculinos de estas obras, para discernir su significado. Así, en los personajes femeninos encontramos varios tipos de silencio, el vinculado a la teoría de trauma, el silencio relacionado con la locura (el de las heroínas del siglo XIX de Gilbert y Gubar), el silencio como soledad y por último, el silencio como reflejo de la incapacidad de vivir “in-between,” entre dos culturas, siguiendo la tesis de Paula Gunn Allen. En el caso de los “Adams,” la cultura de silencio se remonta a la historia de las migraciones chinas en América cuando el silencio era sinónimo de protección de identidad. Siguiendo la tesis de Simal en la que deconstruye el constructo de género, analizo las variantes también presentes en el silencio de los personajes masculinos. Además, partiendo del estudio de José Liste en *American Secrets*, enlazo el tema del silencio con el secretismo.

En el siguiente subcapítulo, exploro el espacio habitado por los emigrantes en América. Para ello, reviso esquemáticamente las diversas teorías existentes sobre estos espacios: el influyente concepto “borderlands” de Gloria Anzaldúa, las “contact zones,” de Marie L. Pratt y las “ethnic islands” de Ronald Takaki, así como los estudios de Jesús Benito, Ana M. Manzanos o Ramón Saldivar. Al mismo tiempo, inspirada en el concepto “borderlands” de Anzaldúa, propongo el término “micro-sociedades” para denominar estos espacios. Mi intención al usar este concepto es dar más importancia al “contenido” que al “continente”, especialmente sus fronteras/“borders.” Defino estas micro-sociedades como espacios transnacionales donde fluyen y se crean identidades igualmente transnacionales. Estas micro-sociedades existen paralelamente al “mainstream” de la sociedad americana, que

interpreto a su vez como una “macro-sociedad” compuesta de diversas “micro-sociedades”, todas ellas de carácter permeable lo cual favorece su carácter “trans”. Jasmine emerge así como epítome de la “border woman” que relata su camino hacia el West, en una novela cuyo final inconcluso sugiere el mantenimiento de ese flujo. Pasando a la narrativa de Jen, me centro en el protagonista masculino, Ralph, y analizo los confines de su “own society/household,” y la incapacidad de este y otros personajes a “actuar y vivir como americanos”. Finalmente, exploro brevemente cómo el choque entre generaciones de emigrantes contribuye a la creación o consolidación de estas “micro-sociedades”.

En *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard afirma que “the house protects the dreamer,” afirmación que me sirve de base para el análisis del espacio doméstico en estas obras como antítesis a una realidad exterior, en muchos casos desconocida para el emigrante. Así, he analizado el significado de las casas en el discurso narrativo del “sueño americano.” Casas que en muchos casos sirven de refugio, como espacios que protegen al emigrante para que pueda seguir soñando o recreando memorias de un pasado imaginario. Asimismo, exploro de qué manera la visión patriarcal de la división del trabajo se mantiene en estas historias, donde el “breadwinner” sigue siendo el hombre. En lo que al espacio doméstico se refiere, es también interesante detenerse en la presencia de la comida y sus posibles significados. Según Anita Mannur y su “nostalgia culinaria,” la comida puede interpretarse como una respuesta a la nostalgia, a la búsqueda de una identidad olvidada y también, como único vínculo del emigrante con el país de origen.

Como he apuntado anteriormente, el concepto de “color bar” emerge como una barrera que diferencia al emigrante étnico de la “mainstream reality”. En el tratamiento de este concepto hago hincapié en los “gendered and racialized bodies,” así como el concepto de dualidad o “doble consciousness,” implícito en el proceso de construcción de la identidad. En

la obra de estas cuatro escritoras, encontraremos algunas escenas que se podrían calificar de encuentro colonial con el “Other”. Por ello, reviso el concepto de “mimicry” acuñado por Homi Bhabha, y compruebo si es aplicable a los casos estudiados.

En el penúltimo subcapítulo del capítulo III, me centro en cuestiones identitarias, en concreto en el proceso incesante de transformación que el individuo experimenta, el llamado “re-fashioning the self.” Así, exploro cómo, en las obras que nos ocupan, los personajes han sufrido cambios y transformaciones, y cómo dichos personajes son o no conscientes de dicha evolución. Este proceso, tan común en las narrativas de emigración, puede vincularse al “Bildungsroman” y a los géneros autobiográficos; por ello, analizo las posiciones contrapuestas de William Boelhower y Sau-ling C. Wong al respecto de las distintas literaturas “étnicas” en Estados Unidos, e intento aplicar sus conclusiones al corpus bajo estudio.

Por último, como he apuntado anteriormente, he considerado interesante la lectura de las obras de *Jasmine* de Mukherjee, *The Woman Warrior*, de Kingston, y *Typical American*, de Jen, desde el punto de vista de la ecocrítica. He decidido partir de las premisas de la más reciente interpretación ecocrítica, que reconoce que las categorías de lo natural/rural y lo artificial/urbano se solapan cada vez más. Después de una revisión del componente natural del “sueño americano”, propongo que la conexión entre “naturaleza” y “sueño americano” ha existido desde la misma percepción inicial de América como tierra prometida, como “open range,” que aseguraba al emigrante expectativas de un futuro prometedor, visión idílica que se ha mantenido y también ha sufrido variaciones en las nuevas versiones del “sueño americano”, como así demuestro en mi análisis.

Conclusión y Contribuciones

En esta tesis he intentado probar y he podido comprobar que hay un componente indiscutiblemente imaginario que ha sustentado el “sueño americano” y, con ello, la identidad de un país desde sus orígenes como tal. El proceso de “self-transformation” continua al que el personaje se ve sometido convierte su “imaginary homeland”, como diría Salman Rushdie, en algo permanente y estable a lo que aferrarse frente a la fluidez del “self.” De la misma manera que los “homelands” son imaginarios, mantengo que América es igualmente una idea imaginada colectivamente. Concluyo, por tanto, que hay múltiples Américas o “imaginary Americas,” evocando a Benedict Anderson, Américas que acogen múltiples micro-sociedades, concibiendo e imaginando de esta manera la idea de este país.

Del análisis realizado concluyo que no hay una gran diferencia en el tratamiento del “sueño americano” en la literatura étnica y no étnica. Evidentemente el punto de distanciamiento entre ambas literaturas viene dado por el “color bar,” presente en la historia de las migraciones asiáticas, pero el constructo “sueño americano” es el mismo para ambas. Los emigrantes, étnicos o no, comparten las mismas expectativas que el “sueño” promete, aunque una vez que intentan perseguir ese “sueño” los emigrantes “racializados” descubran la barrera del “color”. En una literatura donde se cruzan muchas líneas en la ficción de los personajes, no se puede distinguir únicamente entre literatura de emigración y literatura escrita por emigrantes, como así señala Simal y como se ve reflejado en las obras de las autoras estudiadas. Se puede hablar de una literatura entre los paradigmas diaspóricos y transnacionales que borra o al menos confunde las barreras étnicas existentes. En una época en la que somos testigos de una marcada tendencia “trans-” en la literatura asiático

americana, propongo el término “transdream” para estas narrativas, que, al intentar reflejar ese carácter “trans-” del “sueño americano”, han tra(n)spasado muchas barreras de distinta índole.

Por otra parte, como se mencionó con anterioridad, esta tesis propone el concepto de “micro-sociedades,” inspirado en los “borderlands” de Anzaldúa, pero a su vez centrado en el individuo en detrimento de los “borders”. Propongo además la idea de América como un constructo inestable y cambiante, una macro-sociedad integrada por múltiples “micro-sociedades” que conforman la sociedad americana en estas historias de emigrantes (sud)asiáticos en América.